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**Reason, Detachment and Political Egalitarianism
A Critically Analytical Exploration in Thomas Nagel and Pseudo-Dionysian
Apophaticism**

Exall, Maria

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**Reason, Detachment and Political Egalitarianism:
A Critically Analytical Exploration in Thomas Nagel
and Pseudo-Dionysian Apophaticism**

MARIA EXALL

PhD

ABSTRACT

With particular constructive epistemological and political goals strategically in view, this thesis undertakes a critically analytical comparison of key aspects of the thought of Thomas Nagel and the ‘intellectual stream’ of the apophatic tradition originating from the works of Pseudo-Dionysius. In drawing on Nagel, an American ‘analytical’ philosopher, as a primary source, it seeks, in more general terms, to contribute in unique ways to a recent broader renewal of interest in Pseudo-Dionysius for contemporary philosophical and theological concerns. Substantially and specifically, however, in taking the role of detachment in both primary interlocutors as its central guiding focus, the thesis uncovers several fundamental and mutually illuminating orientational and structural resonances between the two, not least among which is a demonstration of the indispensable interwovenness and integration of the epistemological, ethical and political domains in both. Through this integration the thesis seeks further to show in new ways and along fresh trajectories not only the essential ‘this-worldly’ or socially engaged orientation at the heart of detachment, but also the full rational accountability of detachment in both Nagel and Dionysius. Despite their striking similarities, however, crucial differences will be found between the two, most especially in the ‘extent’ of the detachment allowed or demanded by each: differences which will be shown to have an especially important bearing when considering Nagel’s political theory. Whilst the ‘liberal egalitarianism’ yielded by Nagel’s programme is grounded in a ‘two standpoints’ model of detachment – a model which must retain an element of the ‘personal standpoint’ along with the detached ‘impersonal standpoint’ – the ‘radical’ detachment of Dionysian apophaticism (for which Meister Eckhart will be the later exemplar), demands a full ‘erasure’ of the personal perspective, thereby yielding what we shall be calling a ‘kenotic egalitarianism’, key commitments and characteristics of which will be explored at the conclusion.

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Introduction

Via focused engagements with central features of the philosophy of Thomas Nagel, this thesis seeks to retrieve for current understanding a renewed appreciation of the ‘intellectual stream’ of Dionysian apophaticism, with a view generally to demonstrating crucial links and commonalities between the rational demands of faith and ‘spirituality’ on the one hand, and those of philosophy and academic theology on the other. More specifically, however, in terms of its ultimate goals, the thesis aims, through the critical comparison of Nagel and Dionysian apophaticism, to offer new and constructive contributions in the area of political theology by reclaiming a kind of egalitarianism as a legitimate and productive basis for a Christian political outlook as much as it can be for an atheistic or non-religious outlook (such as Nagel’s). By taking a contemporary ‘analytical’ philosopher as a primary point of reference, this thesis also seeks to bring a new, contemporary context and voice to the understanding of ‘detachment’ in the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition and to consider the implications of this for political theology.

The thesis begins with an historical and analytical exploration of Dionysian apophaticism in dialogue with the work of recent scholars, including the historian of Christian mysticism Bernard McGinn and theologian Denys Turner. Their readings of the nature of the tradition as rational, world-affirming, dialectical and a-theistic will be contrasted with other readings, both pre-modern and modern. The thesis then turns to a strategically focused critical exploration of key aspects of Nagel’s epistemology and philosophical ethics, in which the adoption of an ‘impersonal standpoint’ (a form of detachment) is a crucial and necessary component of his rational grounding of moral objectivism. While a subsequent extended critical comparison will identify strong and constructive resonances between Nagel and Dionysian apophaticism on epistemological, moral and political levels, crucial differences will also be found between the process of detachment and the ethical motivation assumed by Nagel’s political theory and those of Meister Eckhart, an exemplar of the intellectual stream of Dionysian apophaticism.

Nagel’s ‘two standpoints’ theory of ethics, which proposes adopting both an impersonal and a personal perspective within the self, will be contrasted with the

Eckhartian model where a fully self-emptying altruism forms the ground of all ethics. We will see that Eckhart's move towards the 'nothingness of the self' is a radical one that Nagel cannot make because human freedom, understood as human autonomy (in the irreducible personal perspective), is indispensable to his epistemological, ethical and also political programmes. Despite the many similarities and resonances, therefore, an important divergence will emerge between Nagel's epistemological and ethical models of detachment (and the 'liberal egalitarianism' these jointly yield on the political level) and Eckhart's apophatic model of detachment (and what I will call the 'kenotic egalitarianism' this yields for political considerations). While fuller critical exploration of this kenotic egalitarianism, including the implications for political policy, goes beyond the scope of this thesis, the thesis does lead to at least two important conclusions. First, it shows in new contexts that approaches grounded in faith, even 'radical' approaches, are not only able to proceed according to the full rigours of reason, but can also share with atheistic or non-religious approaches a common language and a set of common political goals without sacrificing their Christian/religious character. Secondly, through the dialogue with Nagel, it shows that egalitarianism can serve as a legitimate basis for a Christian outlook on ethics and politics.

This introduction begins with a brief survey of what can be seen as a contemporary revival in Pseudo-Dionysian studies, before going on to make a preliminary case for the basic rationale and the constructive promise of drawing on Nagel's modern analytical philosophy to address key themes and possibilities arising from this renewal. It concludes with an annotated outline of the successive chapters of the thesis.

1. Dionysian Studies in Contemporary Scholarship and a Preliminary Rationale for Drawing on Nagel as an Interlocutor

Recent scholarship has made clear the extent of the influence of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius from the 12th until the 16th centuries, a period in which they were at the centre of philosophical and theological debate.¹ The real author of the *Corpus*

¹ The works of Pseudo-Dionysius are *The Mystical Theology*, *The Divine Names*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. In his introductory article to *Pseudo-Dionysius: The*

Areopagiticum, probably a Syrian monk, lived in ‘both the Christian world of the late fifth century’ and ‘the pagan world of late Athenian Neoplatonism’² and represents the end of a trajectory in Patristic mystical theology that runs from Philo and Gregory of Nyssa, alongside that of the Origenist tradition and that of Augustine.³ Until the 12th century, ‘mystical theology’ emerged in sermons and in scriptural and Patristic commentaries, meaning that the influence of Dionysius was largely indirect.⁴ However, from the 12th century onwards there was a revival of interest in the Dionysian texts which coincided with the beginning of a gradual separation of matters of ‘spirituality’ from those of theology.⁵ (I will explore the nature of this separation, and the consequential division of the Dionysian tradition into ‘affective’ and ‘intellectual’ streams, in chapter 1.⁶) This reawakening of interest in the Dionysian texts in the Middle Ages thus fed into a distinct body of knowledge associated with spiritual life.⁷ But the historical separation of the concerns of spirituality from those of theology resulted in the ‘intellectual stream’ of the Dionysian tradition becoming marginalised in relation to wider intellectual debate, until the recent revival of Pseudo-Dionysian studies which I consider below.

Complete Works, Jean Leclercq describes the 12th century as the turning point in the receptions of the texts, and goes on to explain that the ‘influence of Dionysius passed quite naturally from the schools of the twelfth century to those of the thirteenth,’ through commentaries from scholars including Robert Grosseteste, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas and Saint Bonaventure, and then contributed to the flowering of spirituality in the 14th and 15th century in the work of the Rhineland mystics. See Jean Leclercq, ‘Influence and non-influence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages’, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 25-32 (especially pp. 27-30).

² Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), 13-14. Paul Rorem makes a connection between the closing of the official Platonic Academy and the first citing of the Pseudo-Dionysian writings: ‘The Athenian Neoplatonism of Proclus and his school reappeared in the Pseudo-Areopagite’s synthesis of Christian content and Proclean philosophy. Consciously or not the first champions of these writings preserved much of the banished Neoplatonism within a Christian system which then influenced centuries of theology and philosophy.’ Paul Rorem, ‘The Uplifting Spirituality of Pseudo-Dionysius’, in *Christian Spirituality*, vol. 1: *Origins to the Twelfth Century*, edited by Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff and Jean Leclercq (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 133.

³ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 159.

⁴ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of interpretation and method* (London: SPCK 1991; revised edition 1995), 201-02. Sheldrake, referring to the work of Jean Leclercq, notes that Dionysian influence in the monastic context was ‘very slight’.

⁵ Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 49.

⁶ See chapter 1, section 1.d ‘The affective turn’, and my discussion below in the annotated chapter outline.

⁷ Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 49-52.

The publication of a modern critical edition of the works of Dionysius in the early 1990s has been followed by a burgeoning body of studies of the Dionysian texts and their various receptions,⁸ many in relation to contemporary philosophical and theological concerns; of these, I highlight three here.

One common theme amongst scholars involved in this revival of interest in ‘mystical theology’⁹ is the perception of an unwelcome gap, a ‘lacuna’ as Michael Buckley has described it,¹⁰ between ‘spirituality’, academic theology and pastoral studies in current theological thinking. Thomas Merton describes this as a separation between ‘intellectual study of divinely revealed truth’ and the ‘contemplative experience of the truth as if they had nothing to do with each other’, adding that ‘on the contrary, they are simply two aspects of the same thing’.¹¹ This lacuna has been addressed by, amongst others, Sarah Coakley, most recently in her aspiration for a *théologie totale*, and Mark McIntosh in his exploration of the historical integrity of spirituality and

⁸ Gunter Heil, Adolf Ritter and Beate Suchla, eds, *Corpus Dionysiacum* (2 vols) (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990-91). Other influential recent studies focused on the Dionysian texts and their reception include works by Andrew Louth *Denys and Origins* as above, Paul Rorem’s *Eriugena’s Commentary on the Dionysian Celestial Hierarchy* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2005) and *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), Paul Rorem and John Lamoreaux’s introduction to their edited volume *John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus: Annotating the Areopagite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and James McEvoy’s *Mystical Theology: The Glosses by Thomas Gallus and the Commentary of Robert Grosseteste on De Mystica Theologia* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003). A further, broader-based collection is Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang, eds, *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2009).

⁹ The renewed interest in Dionysian studies in contemporary theology is explored in Coakley and Stang, *Re-thinking Dionysius*, but the earlier work of Denys Turner and Mark McIntosh considers mystical theology in the Dionysian apophatic tradition more broadly, notably its influence on mediaeval mystics. See in particular Denys Turner, *Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, eds, *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and Mark McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1998).

¹⁰ ‘Is it not a lacuna in the standard theology, even of our day, that theology neither has nor has striven to forge the intellectual devices to probe in these concrete experiences [the spiritual experience of holy lives] the warrant they present for the reality of God?’ From Buckley’s 1992 Presidential Address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, quoted in McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 14. See also Buckley’s observation that in the 18th century Christianity ‘entered into a defense of the existence of the Christian God without appealing to anything Christian’. Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), 67. See also Vladimir Lossky, ‘Theology and Mysticism in the Tradition of the Eastern Church’, in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. Richard Woods, (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 169-178, where Lossky argues against Henri Bergson that theology and mysticism should not be opposed to one another. Bergson, in works such as *Creative Evolution* and *The Two Sources of Religion and Morality*, implicitly argues for such a separation between spirituality and theology in his distinction between the dynamic religion (mystical) that is personal and creative, and static religion (that of the churches) that is social and conservative.

¹¹ Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Wheathampstead: Anthony Clarke Books, 1972), 197.

theology, and the attempts by certain 20th century theologians to reclaim this in some way, in his *Mystical Theology*.¹² These discussions, along with other recent writings drawing on the Dionysian apophatic tradition,¹³ provide important leverage for current treatments of the relationship of faith to academic enterprises through a reconsideration of the relationship of theology to mysticism. As we shall see below, this positioning of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius – occupying the intersection between faith commitment and philosophical enquiry – is not new; in the centuries that followed the widespread dissemination of the Dionysian texts in the Latin West, reference to and analysis of these texts, particularly *The Mystical Theology*, was used as a way to satisfy both faith and philosophy.¹⁴

The current lacuna between spirituality and academic theology has a particular history in the modern era which, though to some extent relevant to all traditions of Christian spirituality, is particularly pertinent to the Dionysian apophatic tradition whose rational and world-affirming nature may be missed if it is read outside of its historical and philosophical context. In her own work, Coakley has fruitfully illuminated these discussions by bringing apophatic/Dionysian insights to bear on the doctrine of the Trinity,¹⁵ on the concerns of feminist theologians that the perspective of the embodied self is missing from much philosophical and theological discourse,¹⁶ and on the relationship between the physical and ‘spiritual’ senses in her engagement with Eastern theologians in the Heyschast tradition.¹⁷

¹² ‘The method I here call *théologie totale* involves a complex range of interdisciplinary skills; and [involves] link[ing] the theoretical to the pastoral’. Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay ‘On The Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), xvii. See also McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*.

¹³ Recent collections of articles on ‘mystical theology’ in the Dionysian tradition include Louise Nelstrop and Simon Podmore, eds, *Exploring Lost Dimensions in Christian Mysticism: Opening to the Mystical* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) (see particularly Oliver Davies, ‘On Reading the Mediaeval Mystics Today’) and Louise Nelstrop and Simon Podmore, eds, *Christian Mysticism and Incarnational Theology: Between Transcendence and Immanence* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) (see particularly Duane Williams, ‘Between the Apophatic and Cataphatic: Heidegger’s Tautophatic Mystical Linguistics’; Mark Edwards, ‘Plotinus: Monist, Theist or Atheist?’ and Benjamin deSpain, ‘Seeing One’s Own Face in the Face of God: The Doctrine of Divine Ideas in the Mystical Theologies of Dionysius and Nicolas of Cusa’).

¹⁴ See my discussion of this below in section 2.a of the annotated chapter outline.

¹⁵ See her assessment of an apophatic understanding of Trinitarian theology in *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 322-27.

¹⁶ See her discussion of Dionysian ideas of hierarchy and feminist principles in *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 319-22, and also her discussion of the relationship between feminist philosophy and the philosophy of religion in Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 89-107.

¹⁷ See Coakley, *Powers*, esp the section on Gregory of Palamas, pp. 82-85.

A second important manifestation of the revival of interest in Pseudo-Dionysius in relation to contemporary philosophical and theological concerns is the ‘coincidence and intermingling’¹⁸ of this upsurge of interest with a focus on ‘negative theology’ in continental philosophy, whose most significant proponent has been Jacques Derrida.¹⁹ The backdrop to the ‘postmodern’ interest in apophaticism is, as Coakley and Bernard McGinn have both pointed out, the remarkable Dionysian renewal in the early/mid-20th-century France, stemming from the regeneration of Dionysian studies amongst theologians pursuing *ressourcement*, a ‘returning to sources’, in the *nouvelle théologie*.²⁰ This ‘return to sources’ importantly included those of the traditions of Christian mysticism, and can be seen, Coakley says, as a response to the mandated neo-scholasticism of Roman Catholic orthodoxy at this time, and also as a result of the engagement of continental philosophers and theologians with Heidegger’s critique of ‘ontotheology’.²¹ For as Coakley continues, ‘the return to Dionysius [...] could be seen both as a rescue from the rigidity of certain forms of neo-scholastic readings of Thomas Aquinas, and simultaneously as the means of an end-run around Kant’s ban on speculative metaphysics.’²²

A third area of recent academic reflection in which the Dionysian tradition of Christian mysticism features strongly is the engagement of certain voices in analytical philosophy with mystical traditions in explorations of the nature of the

¹⁸ However, as Sarah Coakley points out, this is a coincidence and an intermingling that has not always been knowing or informed. See biographical note to chapter 7 of her *God, Sexuality and Self*, 334.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, in Graham Ward, ed., *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 167-90. In his introduction to the volume, Ward explains that the genealogical roots of postmodern theology and postmodernism lie in structuralism, Heidegger and the French phenomenologists. See also Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), where de Vries discusses the relation between negative theology and the writings of Levinas, Heidegger and Derrida.

²⁰ See Sarah Coakley’s introduction in Coakley and Stang, *Re-thinking*, 4. McGinn points out that the theological debates prompted by the *ressourcement* were many, but it is worth noting one particularly heated debate, between Augustin Poulain and Auguste Soudreau, which focused on a question at the heart of the relationship between the tradition of Dionysian mysticism and Christian theology itself, and pertinent to the themes of this thesis: ‘is the call to mystical contemplation a universal one offered to all Christians, or a special grace available to a select few?’ i.e. is mysticism an ordinary or an extraordinary Christian path? See the discussion in Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (London, SCM Press, 1992), 277-80.

²¹ See Coakley’s introduction in Coakley and Stang, *Re-thinking*, 4. Coakley also explains how *ressourcement* acted in combination with Vladimir Lossky’s polemical reinterpretation of Dionysius ‘as a pincer movement’ against Western scholasticism.

²² See Coakley’s introduction in Coakley and Stang, *Re-thinking*, 4.

self.²³ Louis Dupré, arguing from an analysis of the nature of the self in the transcendental tradition of modern philosophy,²⁴ maintains that it is through an appreciation of the self's capacity for transcendence, the 'dynamic view of a potentially unlimited mind', that mystical traditions can make a significant contribution to philosophical understandings of the self.²⁵ Nevertheless, the understanding of the possibility of radical self-transcendence, perennially asserted by Christian mystics in the Dionysian apophatic tradition (and indeed mystics of other religious traditions), has not as yet, according to Dupré, been taken seriously by modern analytical philosophy. But Dupré also highlights the fact that the 'atmosphere of doubt and dogmatic scepticism' created by modern secularism provides opportunities to revisit the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius.²⁶

In important ways it is precisely this challenge, and its promise as signalled by Dupré, that the present thesis seeks to take up in bringing the work of Thomas Nagel to bear on Dionysian apophaticism in relation to variations on the theme of detachment. Moreover, it has also been observed that among the multifaceted ways in which Dionysian thought has in recent decades been revived in contemporary debate, little if any attention has been given to the relationship between the

²³ One prominent contemporary analytical philosopher who has pointed out the 'false dichotomy' between the understandings of the self in Christian spirituality and in analytical philosophy is John Cottingham. He has brought them into dialogue, notably in relation to psychoanalytic theory. See John Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), especially chapter 4, 'Ethics and the Challenge to Reason', where Cottingham discusses different psychoanalytic models. See also John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). See also Steven Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978) and note 1 of chapter 1 below, for an indication of the varying focuses of analytical philosophers in their engagement with the phenomenon of mystical experience.

²⁴ Louis Dupré, *A Dubious Heritage: Studies in the Philosophy of Religion after Kant* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

²⁵ Louis Dupré 'The Mystical Experience of the Self and its Philosophical Significance', in Woods, *Understanding Mysticism*, 462.

²⁶ See Louis Dupré and James A. Wiseman, *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius, p. 81. See also Dupré's observation on the relevance of the negative way tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart and the mediaeval mystics for today: 'If the believer, who shares in fact, if not in principle, the practical atheism of his entire culture, is left no choice but to vitalize this negative experience and to confront his feeling of God's absence, he may find himself on the very road walked by spiritual pilgrims in more propitious times. What was once the arduous route travelled only by a religious elite is now, in many instances, the only one still open to us.' Louis Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection: Excursions in the Phenomenology and Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 139. Dupré also suggests (echoing Karl Rahner's view that the Christian of the third millennium will be a mystic or not a Christian at all) that for modern-day Christians this is a 'movement for survival'. Dupré, *Religious Mystery*, 143.

Dionysian tradition and current ethical or political theory.²⁷ The present thesis also contributes on these fronts through Nagel, whose fundamental philosophy of cognition will be found to have direct implications for his moral and political theory, which in turn serve reciprocally as crucial factors informing, and indeed importantly motivating, the structure of his epistemological enterprise. By thus proceeding from Nagel's epistemological conception of the mind's capacity for adopting a 'view from nowhere', and his associated conceptions of the 'impersonal' standpoint in ethics and 'impartiality' in politics, I will be seeking to bring a new and contemporary voice to an understanding of the ongoing significance of detachment in the Dionysian tradition, in its epistemological, ethical and political implications. My comparison of Nagel's philosophy with that of the Dionysian apophatic tradition will be focused on both the similarities and the differences in their accounts of the process of detachment and its implications for ethics and politics.

I should acknowledge that in drawing constructively on Nagel's work, I am aware I am going against the grain of a very strong current in recent scholarship which polemicalises against the very idea of a 'view from nowhere', especially in the context of theological and religious discussions.²⁸ Nagel's conception has been subject to sustained critiques from an array of quarters, as an inadmissible abstraction from cultural, social and historical contexts and as supportive of dominant Enlightenment

²⁷ This point is made by Mary-Jane Rubenstein in her essay 'Dionysius, Derrida and the Critique of Ontotheology', in Coakley and Stang, *Re-thinking*, 195-208. Rubenstein points out that 'the peritheological conversation between deconstructionism and apophaticism has been almost entirely linguistic: that is to say, it has never quite entered the terrain of the ethico-political.' She attempts to remedy this in her essay, especially the section 'Hierarchy, teleology and the problem of the political' (pp. 203-208).

²⁸ See Graham Ward, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Chichester: Wiley, 2001) for the wide array of theologians who have engaged with the 'postmodern scepticism at the universalising certainties of modernity', including the perceived 'implosion of secularism' that is part of it (pp. xvi-xx in Ward's introduction), on matters of aesthetics, ethics, gender, hermeneutics, and in engagement with the phenomenology and the thought of Heidegger and Derrida. For more on the 'postmodern scepticism' see Coakley's bibliographical notes on 'Theology, postmodernity, and philosophical non-foundationalism' (pp. 31-32 in *God, Sexuality and the Self*). Here Coakley asserts that various 'religious ploys' have been used in the massive assault on the Enlightenment project, including Alasdair MacIntyre's late modern 'adjudication between competing historical paradigms of rationality' as well as the work of Stanley Hauerwas, John Milbank, Nicolas Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga, in addition to those who followed the deconstruction project of Derrida. See also her notes on p334. MacIntyre shares with such postmodern philosophers and theologians the view that the Enlightenment project has failed 'to provide a shared, public, rational justification for morality.' Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981, 50.

discourses of power.²⁹ What often goes unrecognised, however, is how tightly bound up the epistemology of the ‘view from nowhere’ is with Nagel’s socially engaged ethics and also with the strongly socially engaged egalitarianism underpinning his political outlook. Indeed, this thesis will show that there are significantly constructive and mutually illuminating similarities between Nagel’s understanding of detachment as a ‘view from nowhere’ and the conception of detachment in the Dionysian tradition. In both approaches we will see that detachment in Nagel is not a hollowed out impersonality or remote impartiality, but rather acts as the rational basis for a strongly socially embedded ethical and political motivation. In both Nagel’s rationalist ethics and the ethics arising from the Dionysian tradition we will discover the aspiration for an expanded and deeper moral conception of the self.

Nagel’s epistemological conception of the ‘view from nowhere’, then, serves as the basis for his moral objectivism, which provides an ethical and political framework for concerns about injustice and inequality. Nagel follows Kant in insisting that the source of human morality is categorical or rational, but whilst Kant makes human freedom the central plank of a proper conception of moral agency, Nagel sees it as based in a ‘conception of oneself as a person amongst others equally real’.³⁰ This capacity to conceive of oneself merely as such a person amongst others, combined with his understanding of ethical motivation as coming from an ‘impersonal standpoint’ in the self, allows for the possibility of altruism. From this Nagel develops his liberal egalitarian approach, where social and economic justice is predicated on the internalisation of moral objectivity. In this political theory Nagel achieves an important synthesis of the demands of personal autonomy with the aspiration towards greater social and economic equality. He stands alongside other theorists such as Ronald Dworkin, Amartya Sen and also Gerald Cohen in the later 20th–/early 21st–century strand of the modern liberal tradition, which emerged following the publication of John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* in 1970.³¹

²⁹ See Thomas Nagel, *Concealment and Exposure, and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), where Nagel deals with critiques of his rationalism and liberal egalitarianism from feminist critics including Catherine Mackinnon, and from Cohen (see note 32 below). He discusses the critique put forward by Alasdair MacIntyre in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* in his article ‘MacIntyre versus the Enlightenment’, in *Other Minds: Critical Essays 1969-1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 203-09. See further discussion of MacIntyre below.

³⁰ Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 14.

³¹ Rawls’ influence extends beyond moral philosophy: to jurisprudence (see the late Ronald Dworkin’s final work *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011),

In drawing out certain basic similarities between Dionysian apophaticism and Nagel, I will also be challenging what has become a quite widespread critique of the liberal individualism of modern moral philosophy, notably the view espoused by Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre rejects any notion of a universalisable rationality to be derived from a ‘detached’ perspective as an impoverished and ‘fruitless’ product of Enlightenment philosophy.³² He sees all rationality and morality as socially local and particular, and a matter of inherited virtue.³³ Echoing MacIntyre’s criticism of Enlightenment thinking and its conceptions of the self,³⁴ political theorists such as Charles Taylor, and to a lesser extent Michael Sandel and Michael Walzer, share MacIntyre’s criticism of the liberal conception of the individual self as universalisable, and of the cross-cultural universalism espoused by Nagel in his egalitarian political theory, arguing instead that reference to community is integral to any account of human selfhood, agency and practical reasoning.³⁵

MacIntyre argues for a contemporary moral philosophy which takes its roots in what he sees as the richer conceptions of rationality found in pre-modern historical traditions, most particularly those with a religious or teleological worldview.³⁶ maintaining that a conception of moral and political virtue is more fruitfully based on pre-modern Christian traditions which do not presume a ‘detached self’ abstracted from social or cultural context. However, while by no means devaluing the importance of historical and cultural embeddedness emphasised by MacIntyre and

where he makes the case for ethical and moral value being unitary); and to economics and the social choice theory propounded by Amartya Sen (see particularly *Rationality and Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2004) for his explanation of the reciprocity of these two concepts). G.A. Cohen represents an egalitarianism with a different emphasis to Nagel’s. For Nagel, Cohen’s critique of the moral coherence of the liberal egalitarian position, in *If You’re an Egalitarian How Come You Are So Rich?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) (his 1996 Gifford Lectures) is one of the most pertinent for contemporary political theory: see Nagel’s discussion of this in his essay ‘Cohen and Inequality’, in *Concealment and Exposure*, 107-12. In addition to these theorists’ considerations, there has been a rich debate on the nature of egalitarianism with reference to Rawls among moral philosophers such as G.E.M. Anscombe, Philippa Foot and R.M. Hare.

³² See Nagel, ‘MacIntyre’, 205-06.

³³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 127.

³⁴ First published in 1981, and followed by other works including *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* in 1988, which advanced his argument further.

³⁵ Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 158-62.

³⁶ He sees Aristotelianism as philosophically the most powerful of the pre-modern modes of moral thought, and the one that has the greatest potential to challenge modernity’s moral and political theories. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 118.

others, I shall show in this thesis that the concept of the ‘detached self’ is not just a product of Enlightenment thought, for it is also central to the pre-modern Christian mysticism of Dionysian apophaticism. The historical origins of concepts of rationality, objectivity, the impersonal and the impartial are of course a valid matter for enquiry and debate. But the lines drawn by MacIntyre between the morality and politics of modernity and those of pre-modern times, and his assertion that the ‘detached self’ is a product of Enlightenment thought (and is found to be wanting because of Enlightenment ‘excesses’), must at the very least be open to question, as must also be the corresponding view that rational principles deriving from such a detached perspective cannot be properly socially engaged. This thesis will be attempting to demonstrate otherwise.

In the last chapters of the thesis I shall also be arguing, through an analysis of the works of Meister Eckhart, that it is possible for non-religious or ‘secular’ and religious approaches to share common political goals. I will be using Nagel’s moral theory to amplify the claim that there is a universalist approach implicit in Eckhart’s mystical theology, and that the egalitarianism that can be seen to follow from this can serve as a legitimate basis for a contemporary Christian approach to ethics and political life as much as it can for ‘secular’ approaches.

However, this thesis will also show that there are important divergences between the two understandings of detachment: most crucially for our purpose, the ‘radical’ nature of detachment in the Dionysian apophatic account (involving a full ‘erasure’ of the self) is something which Nagel’s programme by definition cannot allow. In the concluding chapter of the thesis, I will explore how what I shall be calling a ‘kenotic’ understanding of the self, based on the concept of radical detachment in Dionysian apophaticism, together with certain elements of Nagel’s ethical and political theory, can point to a model of egalitarianism which is both contemporarily relevant and faithful to a ‘classical’ reading of the Dionysian tradition.

2. Annotated Chapter Outline

2.a Historical and philosophical context of Dionysian apophaticism (Chapters 1 and 2)

Because I am comparing a spiritual tradition based on pre-modern ideas with a modern philosophical approach, it is necessary to acknowledge and explore the changing role of the Dionysian texts in the history of ideas. It has been demonstrated that in the Middle Ages (up to the 16th century) there were more commentaries on the texts of Dionysius³⁷ than on any other philosophical/theological works apart from the Bible and the works of Boethius.³⁸ Kees Waaijmann interprets this widespread engagement with the texts by Mediaeval Christian theologians as an attempt to balance *ratio*, which declares God to be completely unknowable, with the faith conviction that God makes Godself known.³⁹ Michel de Certeau sees the role of the Dionysian apophatic tradition in the later Middle Ages as ideological, and I shall consider his analysis, which sees the Dionysian texts as uniting the ‘visible’ and the ‘invisible’ spheres at a time when these were being forced apart by emerging social and economic conditions.⁴⁰ I shall explore how, as Louis Dupré puts it, faith has come to ‘occupy an order of its own with a minimum of experiential content, and religious experience has become a privilege of a spiritual elite – so called “mystics”’.⁴¹ For by the modern era the Dionysian texts had moved from the centre of theological learning and philosophical thought to the category of ‘mystical writings’ now marginal in intellectual debate.

³⁷ In this thesis I will be concentrating on the epistemology of detachment in the two texts *The Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names*. *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* will not be considered in any detail.

³⁸ Karlfried Froelich, ‘Pseudo-Dionysius and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century’, in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 33.

³⁹ See Kees Waaijman, ‘Towards a Phenomenological Definition of Spirituality’, *Studies in Spirituality* 3 (1993), 5-57 (especially pages 6 and 32). Waaijman points out that though the great thinkers of the Middle Ages – Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure – managed to combine the systematisation of faith with philosophy, they also contributed to the subsequent drawing apart of the two.

⁴⁰ See his discussion of the changes in mysticism from the 13th to the 17th century, in Michael de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992).

⁴¹ Dupré, ‘Truth in Religion’, in *Religious Mystery*, 27.

In chapter 1, then, I identify significant aspects in the historical development of Dionysian apophaticism that have led to its decline in perceived relevance to intellectual debate. Paul Rorem has explained that, following the 13th-century interpretation and rewriting of Dionysian texts by Thomas Gallus of the Victorine School, the influence of Dionysian ideas took two different directions. The narrative of the Dionysian tradition, according to Rorem, ‘can be simplified by distinguishing the line that followed the Victorine synthesis of love and knowledge from the line that did not. In the first category are Bonaventure, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and many later authors; in the latter, Albert the Great and Meister Eckhart.’ Rorem labels these two streams of the Dionysian tradition ‘affective’ and ‘intellectual’, maintaining further that modern anti-intellectual interpretations of the apophatic tradition are the legacy of this ‘affective turn’.⁴² Philip Sheldrake has also analysed the development of the Dionysian tradition in a similar way, describing how the affective turn in the 12th century, encouraged by the romantic sensibility of the 12th-century Renaissance, led to a new genre of spiritual treatises. He sees the writings of Hugh and Richard of St Victor as influencing the development of a distinct spiritual theology that combined subjective experience with ‘scientific’ theology. I will discuss further the spiritual theology of the Victorines and their emphasis on love rather than knowledge as the way to God when I consider the English mystical text *The Cloud of Unknowing*.⁴³

Rorem and Sheldrake’s analysis of the two streams in the development of Dionysian apophaticism is shared by both Denys Turner and Bernard McGinn,⁴⁴ who will

⁴² See Paul Rorem *Pseudo Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and Their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), especially his discussion on the influence of *The Divine Names* (pp. 167-74).

⁴³ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology- Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (London, Darton Longman Todd 1998), 41.

⁴⁴ See Denys Turner’s analysis in *The Darkness of God*, where he explains that experiential interpretations of the Dionysian texts in late Medieval theology distanced themselves from the classical Neoplatonic dialectics of negativity. See also Bernard McGinn’s article ‘Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal’ (*Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 8(1) (2008), 44-63), where he criticises the very idea of mystical *experience*. I will be discussing the problem of experiential interpretations of the Dionysian texts following the affective turn in chapter 1 below. For a contrasting view, see Coakley’s introduction to *Re-thinking*, where she questions the usefulness of this ‘binary taxonomy’, seeing it as too blunt a tool for explaining the historic variety of Dionysian influences. Her two main objections are firstly that it is a Western taxonomy which separates *eros* and *nous* in a way that is less relevant in Eastern Christian thought, and secondly that there are subdivisions within the intellectual and affective streams where commentators have combined creatively both aspects. Coakley and Stang, *Re-thinking*, 3.

feature importantly in my exploration of the historical context and contemporary readings of the Dionysian tradition.⁴⁵ I shall analyse their understanding of the dialectical relationship between the manifested nature of the Christian God and God's unknowability within the intellectual stream of Dionysian apophaticism. This classical understanding of apophaticism reflects a Plotinian 'negative dialectic of positive transcendence',⁴⁶ which reveals the shape not only of faith, but also of reason.⁴⁷ This rationalist and world-affirming interpretation of the epistemology of the Dionysian apophatic tradition eschews our modern understanding of human autonomy, presuming a fundamental connection between the intellect (in its pre-modern sense of *intellectus*) and divine reality. Anna Williams has shown that this *intellectus*, the concept of the intellect adopted by patristic theologians from 'Christian philosophy',⁴⁸ was much broader than what we understand as the intellect today and included significant elements of what we would now understand as willing: the intellect in patristic theology is both a divine attribute, a definite human faculty, and a basis for human sanctification.⁴⁹

Having analysed the history of the Dionysian tradition and its relationship to faith and reason, I go on in chapter 2 to analyse the Neoplatonic origins of the dialectic at the heart of Dionysian apophaticism and its philosophical framework, with particular reference to the thought of Plotinus. Here I draw on key elements of Plotinian thought that will form the basis for the subsequent comparison of the Dionysian

⁴⁵ I share the analysis of Turner, who sees the 'classical' understanding of mystical theology in the Dionysian tradition not as a separate and optional element in theology, but rather as the 'mystical element' in all theology. He summarises the understanding of the 'mystical' in classical mediaeval apophaticism as 'an exoteric dynamic *within* the ordinary, as being the negative dialectics of the ordinary.' Turner, *Darkness*, 268. Also see note 20 above referring to the discussion by McGinn.

⁴⁶ 'When Plotinus speaks of the *One* [...] it comes nearer than anything else in Greek philosophy to what we [Christians] mean by God. We have taken over Plotinus's "negative theology of positive transcendence" and speak of God by negations.' A.H. Armstrong, *An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy* (London: Methuen, 1947), 182. Armstrong also points out the difference between this Plotinian *One* and that of Plato, arguing that Plato's *One/Good/First Principle* of the World of forms 'was itself a Form and a substance, an all-inclusive Form containing all the others. It had not this unique transcendence and otherness which Plotinus gives the *One*.'

⁴⁷ See Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), (especially p. 71), where he contends that the 'shape' of reason is the same as the 'shape' of faith, i.e. the dialectic between the apophatic and cataphatic exists *within* both reason and faith, not *between* reason and faith.

⁴⁸ See Pierre Hadot's essay on 'Christian Philosophy', in Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 126-44.

⁴⁹ See A.N. Williams, *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.

tradition with Nagel's rationalism in later chapters, as a proper understanding of the metaphysical assumptions of Dionysian apophaticism will be necessary in order to analyse effectively the ethics implied by the tradition. I here consider the 'negative naturalism' implicit in the Plotinian teleology of non-being, based on the model of the procession and return of the One, and his 'mystical realism'.

2.b Dionysian apophaticism and Nagel's epistemology and ethics (Chapters 3 and 4)

In chapters 3 and 4 I outline Nagel's epistemology and his ethical theory, and show that his rationalist philosophy and the epistemology of the Dionysian tradition share two similar meta-assumptions: firstly that introspection is the starting point of knowledge, and secondly that reasoning allows us to participate in truth. In his rationalist ethics and realist epistemology, and particularly in his emphasis on the process of detachment to achieve a universal perspective, there are important continuities in Nagel's philosophy from central elements of Dionysian apophaticism. By comparing certain key themes present in both Dionysian apophaticism and Nagel's rationalism, and showing where there are similarities and continuities in their epistemological approach, I shall seek to demonstrate that human reason in its full critical rigour can be an area of common ground between apophatic ideas and Nagel's rationalist philosophy.

In chapter 3 I show that Nagel's teleology of reason and his realism about our finitude allow us to be open to a reality beyond our human understanding. Whilst in Neoplatonic and Patristic thought this is interpreted as responsiveness to the divine mind, in Nagel's epistemology our reasoning is our response as finite creatures to an independently existing real world. These epistemological principles in turn will form the basis for his ethical theory, with a realism about value that leads him to reject relativism and instead devise an ethical system in which we have to take into account a 'centreless world' and a 'view from nowhere' in our practical reasoning. Nagel's emphasis on the importance of our human capacity to seek a more and more objective understanding of reality is, in contrast to the emphases of modern idealism, epistemologically open both in process and in its goal.

In chapter 4 I consider Nagel's theory of ethical motivation and show how the moral objectivism at the heart of his egalitarianism follows from his rationalism and realism. We have, according to Nagel, the capacity to occupy an objective view in our practical reasoning, and it is this capacity that allows us to adopt an impersonal standpoint through a transcendence of our personal perspective. Thus Nagel sees a necessary connection between rationality and human action which means that, through practical reasoning, we are all able to 'live in part of the truth'.⁵⁰ It is this that forms the epistemological basis for the possibility of shared interests which can then become a universal basis for the ideas of equality and social solidarity. Nagel's emphasis on the importance of objectivity in practical reasoning leads to a justification of the universality of values which themselves are a response to the reality of the world.

Nagel sees the impersonal standpoint, and its political corollary of impartiality, as the basis for ethical action. But at the end of chapter 4 I shall also point out an irresolvable tension in Nagel's theory: in the balancing of the impersonal standpoint with the personal standpoint, and political impartiality with the demands of partiality in society. Nagel maintains that this is, at root, an unavoidable tension between the two standpoints within the self. With this tension in mind I focus in the last part of the thesis on a comparison of the concept of the self in Nagel's egalitarianism and that contained in the ethics implied by the apophaticism of the Dionysian tradition.

2.c Self-transcendence, detachment and universalism (Chapters 5 and 6)

In chapter 5 I outline the significant features of Nagel's political egalitarianism and explain how he accommodates the demands of the personal with those of the impersonal in the self, whilst maintaining an aspiration for a more equal society. He justifies his liberal political egalitarianism by making a rationalist case for a link between political impartiality and equality. Although detachment and universality are key themes in Nagel's moral and political theory, expressed in his ideas of the impersonal standpoint and political impartiality, there are, as I discuss in chapter 6,

⁵⁰ For Nagel the more we place our individual thoughts under the "control" of a universal standard the closer we are to the truth. See Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), 76.

substantial differences between these and the model of detachment and universality that we find in the Dionysian apophatic tradition.

Using the thought of Meister Eckhart, an exemplar of the intellectual stream of the Dionysian tradition, I compare apophatic conceptions of self-transcendence in ideas of ‘bare being’ and the ‘nothingness of the self’, and contrast these with the practice of self-transcendence in Nagel’s ethics and politics. Nagel’s objectivist moral theory, on which his political egalitarianism depends, assumes that there are two standpoints (the impersonal and the personal) within the self, and that the personal standpoint is epistemologically, ethically or politically irreducible. By contrast, an Eckhartian approach presumes that a complete erasure of the personal perspective is necessary for ethical action.

In the conclusion to this thesis, and on the basis of the ground covered in the foregoing discussions, I point to the possibilities of developing an egalitarian political theology that combines insights from Dionysian apophaticism with key elements of Nagel’s political theory – toward what I will call a ‘kenotic egalitarianism’. The grounding of such a kenotic egalitarianism in a negative anthropology means its basis is divine freedom, rather than human freedom, whilst its egalitarianism allows for a positive engagement with contemporary secular political theory. While any fuller development of such a kenotic egalitarianism extends well beyond the scope of this thesis (and would in fact comprise the starting point of another study), I conclude by considering briefly, in a provisional and preliminary way, certain characteristics of such an approach to political theology.

Chapter 1

Faith, Reason and the Dionysian Dialectic

Among the central contentions of this thesis is that apophaticism in the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition does not reject rationality, but rather that a rigorous attention to the rightful authority of reason is integral to it. It follows from this that philosophical engagement with the Dionysian apophatic tradition is essential to a proper understanding of the significance of that tradition. Many contemporary philosophers, however, would place the central assumptions of apophaticism beyond rational debate.¹ In this chapter I will provide a historical context to my basic contention that reason is central to Dionysian apophaticism by examining the effect of what has been called the ‘affective turn’ in Christian spirituality on our understanding of the texts of Dionysius today.

In the first part of this chapter I outline the history of the use of the Dionysian texts, focusing on *The Mystical Theology* and *Divine Names*. These are the texts in which we find the key principles that will be the focus of my comparison with the epistemology of Thomas Nagel in chapter 3 below. In the second part I explain some of the key issues for any modern reader of the texts, focussing on the critiques of the scholars of the Dionysian tradition, Denys Turner and Bernard McGinn, of some modern experiential readings of the texts. Turner and McGinn have expressed concern about reading the Dionysian texts without an understanding of the Neoplatonic epistemology that is central to them. So after discussing the historical context of the theology present in the Dionysian texts in this chapter, I shall go on in chapter 2 to discuss the philosophical origins of the Dionysian tradition in Neoplatonic thought. The rational and world-affirming nature of the Dionysian tradition is the feature most commonly obscured by the misreading of the texts, yet

¹ The cognitive claims of ‘mysticism’ (generally perceived as claims about the nature of mystical experiences) are challenged in both the empiricist and rationalist strands of analytical philosophy, but both consider mysticism as an ‘experience’ – an approach I will critique in sections 2.b and 2.c of this chapter. See Steven Katz (ed), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), particularly the essays ‘On Mystic Visions as Sources of Knowledge’ by Nelson Pike, ‘Understanding Religious Experience’ by Ninian Smart, and ‘Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique’, by Peter Moore.

these are the key features that link apophatic thought with action in the world, which is the theme of the later chapters of this thesis.

1. The Historical Context of the Dionysian Texts

In the sections below I draw out two particular historical developments in the interpretation of the Dionysian apophatic tradition that can be shown to have had significant effects on subsequent thinking about the role of reason in the Christian faith tradition. The first is a certain separation of spirituality² from theology in the late Middle Ages and the consequential reinterpretation of the apophatic concept of unknowing as something that *is opposed to* knowledge and, as Sheldrake has explained, the resulting division between the affective side of faith and conceptual knowledge.³ This development is particularly evident in writings such as the 14th-century English mystical text *The Cloud of Unknowing*.⁴ I argue that this reinterpretation separated the Christian apophatic tradition from important aspects of its Neoplatonic and Patristic roots, not least the central role of reason. The second development within apophaticism I consider is the move away from what was originally a liturgically based and public spirituality to spirituality with greater

² The prevalent use of the term 'spirituality' in our modern day has instrumentalist aspects which we will critique in section 2.a of this chapter. This makes it an inappropriate description of apophaticism in the Dionysian tradition, for nowadays many features of the Christian mystical tradition, and indeed of the spiritual traditions of other faiths, are cut away from their historical context and marketed as optional techniques to aid individual psychotherapy or as part of a well-being agenda. Examples are the use of 'mindfulness' techniques in business, education, and mental and physical health contexts. Sociologists of religion have analysed the modern understanding of 'spirituality' and how it relates (or not) to religious institutions and its wider meaning and social context: see, for example, Wade Clark Roof, *The Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001) and Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spirituality Revolution; Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2005). See also note 78 below.

³ In summary, the High Middle Ages in the West were characterised by growing divisions within theology and the gradual separation of spirituality from theology. [...] This division went deeper than method or content. It was at heart, a division between the affective side of faith (or participation) and conceptual knowledge. Further within what we think of as spirituality there was a concentration on interiority that separated it from public liturgy and from ethics. By the end of the Middle Ages, the "spiritual life" had increasingly moved to the margins of theology and culture as a whole.' Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology*, 43.

⁴ See Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology*, 41. He describes how the affective turn in the 12th century, encouraged by the romantic sensibility of the 12th-century Renaissance, led to a new genre of spiritual treatises, including that of Hugh and Richard of St Victor which led to the development of a distinct spiritual theology that combined subjective experience with 'scientific' theology. See section 1.d of this chapter, where I consider the spiritual theology of *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

emphasis on inner devotion. This forms the ground for my discussion in the next part of this chapter, where I shall show that the modern-day separation between contemplation and philosophy, and between spiritual practice and rational thought, has led to an anti-intellectual bias in modern spiritualities. We will see that the long and deep connections between what we now understand by ‘reasoning’ and what we have come to call ‘mysticism’, which were to the fore up until the Middle Ages, have since been obscured by subsequent instrumentalist and positivist developments in Christian spirituality.⁵

1.a Unknowing - the historical context

It is in the Greek contemplative tradition, alongside certain conceptions of wisdom in Jewish thought, that we find the primary sources of the importance of reason and self-knowledge in Dionysian apophaticism.⁶ The Platonic conception of contemplation reworked ideas from the writings of Pythagoras, Orphism and Parmenides. There was a mutual interaction between philosophy and the *practices* of mysticism, an interaction presumed in early Greek thought and followed through by Neoplatonic philosophers,⁷ and *askesis* (inner activities of the thought and will which could lead to a ‘thought of all’) informed contemplative practice in Dionysian tradition.⁸ We will discuss in chapter 2 the Neoplatonic metaphysical basis for

⁵ In this chapter, sections 2.a and 2.b below

⁶ Bernard McGinn has identified the influence of the Jewish tradition of ascension and wisdom literature as also significant in the development of Christian mysticism in the Dionysian tradition. See McGinn, *Foundations*, chapter 1.

⁷ On the integration of philosophy and mystical practices, see both Pierre Hadot on ‘ancient spiritual exercises’ in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1995) and Sara Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-Discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus and Damascius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Rappe has pointed out that the use of rituals and symbolism in the Greek mystery tradition is presumed in the thought of Plotinus, the pre-eminent Neoplatonic philosopher, even though such rituals are not specifically referred to in the *Enneads* (see her introduction in *Reading Neoplatonism*). Hadot too sees Plotinus as following through the concept of spiritual exercises into his philosophy as expounded in the *Enneads*, with the emphasis on spiritual progress as a feature more significant in Neoplatonism than in earlier Platonism. For example Porphyry, the disciple of Plotinus, maintained that happiness through contemplation was not achieved in the accumulation of discourses and abstract teaching, but rather by making sure in the process of study that these teachings become ‘nature and life’ within us, see Hadot, *Philosophy*, 100.

⁸ Bernard McGinn also maintains that because of the mutual interaction between philosophy and the practices of mysticism in Neoplatonic ideas, both reason and mystery had central roles in the subsequent development of Dionysian apophaticism. Concepts central to the Greek idea of

Dionysian dialectical theology and how many of the conceptual presumptions of ancient spiritual exercises were embedded in this metaphysics.

The very choice of the pen-name of Dionysius is a reference by the author of the Dionysian texts to the Graeco-Roman tradition of devotion to unknown gods, for it was Dionysius (together with Damaris and others) who, upon listening to Paul's sermon in Acts 17:34 and his reference to the inscription on the altar 'to an unknown God', became believers.⁹ Paul's sermon has been interpreted as a conscious rapprochement of the wisdom of pagan Athens with the revelation of God in Christ of Pauline theology. It is perhaps evidence of a greater convergence between Platonism and Pauline theology than is commonly acknowledged. Charles Stang has argued that such convergence renders attempts to distinguish between the Platonist and Christian strands of Dionysian apophaticism unhelpful.¹⁰ The claim of apostolic authorship, then, points us back to the tradition of unknowability of the transcendent God, a tradition that can be traced in a variety of authors and texts from the middle Platonic period.¹¹ It was Plotinus who systematised the conception of radical unknowability into an overall epistemological framework, and it was from this base that Dionysius developed his conception of divine darkness and unknowing, and I shall be examining further this development from Neoplatonic doctrine in chapter 2.¹²

In the words of the author of *The Divine Names*:

God is [...] known in all things and as distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and unknowing. Of him there is conception, reason, understanding, touch, perception, opinion, imagination, name and many other

contemplation produced from this interaction were expanded and developed by Patristic theologians. See McGinn, *Foundations*, especially the chapter on the Greek contemplative ideal.

⁹ See Acts 17 .22-34. V 34: 'What therefore you worship as unknown I proclaim to you.'

¹⁰ Central to Stang's argument is his interpretation of *Galatians* 2.20 ('no longer I, it is Christ who lives in me') as an apophatic anthropology. Stang sees Pauline theology as attempting to 'enfold pagan wisdom to the new order and dispensation in Christ'. Charles M. Stang, 'Dionysius, Paul and the Significance of the Pseudonym', in Coakley and Stang, *Re-thinking*, 14.

¹¹ The principle of 'unknowability' of a transcendent deity can be found amongst the early Neoplatonists, early Christians, Gnostics and within the Chaldean Oracles and the Corpus Hereticum. See McGinn, *Foundations*, 43.

¹² Paul Rorem sees the Neoplatonic tradition of unknowability as part of the Alexandrian and Cappadocian legacy from Philo through Clement and Origen to Gregory of Nyssa. See Rorem, *Commentary*, 124.

things. On the other hand he cannot be understood, words cannot contain him, no name can lay hold of him. He is not one of the things that are and he cannot be known in any of them. He is all things in all things and is no thing among things. He is known to all from all things and he is known to no one to anyone.¹³

Moreover the author maintains that ‘it is not simply the case that God is so overflowing with wisdom that “his understanding is beyond measure” but rather, he actually transcends all reason, all intelligence, and all wisdom’,¹⁴ for

[t]he most divine knowledge of God, that which comes from unknowing, is achieved in a union far beyond the mind, when the mind turns away from all things, even from itself, and when it is made one with the dazzling rays, being then and there enlightened by the inscrutable depth of Wisdom.¹⁵

In chapter 1 of *The Mystical Theology* we are exhorted to leave behind ‘everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is’, to undertake an ‘undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything’, so we can ‘be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is’.¹⁶ When we do this we do not meet God Godself, but contemplate the divine darkness where God dwells.¹⁷ We can plunge into the ‘truly mysterious darkness of unknowing’, by renouncing all that the mind can conceive, and then we can ‘know beyond the mind by knowing nothing’.¹⁸

In the Middle Ages the concept of *intellectus* included an assumption of coincidence between the intellect and the will, a coincidence still prevalent in the time of

¹³ *The Divine Names*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, 109.

¹⁴ *The Divine Names*, 105. The quotation is from Psalm 147.

¹⁵ *The Divine Names*, 109.

¹⁶ *The Mystical Theology* in *Pseudo Dionysius: The Complete Works*, 135.

¹⁷ *The Mystical Theology*, 137.

¹⁸ And ‘become united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge’ (*The Mystical Theology* p 137). The first chapter of *The Mystical Theology* makes specific reference to Moses’ ascent up Mount Sinai, a favourite narrative of Patristic mystical theologians including Gregory of Nyssa.

Aquinas, and a continuation from Augustine through Gregory the Great.¹⁹ When Aquinas asserts that truth is the goal of contemplation and hence the contemplative life is wholly intellectual, he is presuming that the desire for truth at all is an act of will. Hence contemplation through an act of the intellect can fulfil the will's desire for God.²⁰ Mediaeval authors continued to use the Augustinian metaphors of the *acies mentis* (the soul's cutting edge) and *scintilla rationis* (the spark of reason) to 'denote a presence within the human mind of a source of its knowing which exceeds the human, the point in the soul where it overlaps with what is above it'. There is a place in the soul, then, where the human mind 'lives beyond its powers'.²¹ However, by the 14th century *intellectus* was subject to conceptualist revision and reasoning became more closely identified with *ratio* (ratiocination).²² One of the consequences of this revision, in effect a narrowing down of the concept of *intellectus*,²³ was the marginalisation of the intellectual stream of the Dionysian apophatic tradition within rational debate and the promotion of the affective stream as more typical of Christian mysticism. The consequences of this for my reading of the Dionysian tradition today will be the focus of the second part of this chapter, where I will draw out the two main themes in the development of apophatic spirituality in the Late Middle Ages I have identified above: the move to a spirituality *of love* rather than *of knowledge*, and the move from public liturgy to inner devotion.

The next section continues with the description of the historical context of the Dionysian tradition, outlining the way in which the Dionysian texts themselves contributed to the development of Christian spirituality and theology. We shall then briefly consider how the disputed orthodoxy of the Dionysian texts has affected the use of apophatic ideas by systematic theologians.

¹⁹ See Mark McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Chichester: Wiley, 1998), 70-71, where he makes reference to Summa 11 11 Q. 180. McIntosh also points out that the assumption of coincidence represents a claim that love and knowledge are at the highest level co-inherent.

²⁰ Denys Turner has shown that Dionysian and Augustinian theologies have important similarities in their approach to reason and its relationship to knowledge and being, a shared approach he summarises as a presumption that to be human at all 'the human mind must be more than human'. Turner, *Faith*, 83.

²¹ Turner, *Faith*, 83.

²² Turner, *Faith*, 81.

²³ Anna Williams suggests that in Patristic thought the role of the mind was to be a bridge between the theological and the 'spiritual', for both *theoria* and *contemplatio* involve 'gazing upon divine nature and divine things'. See discussion in Williams, *Divine Sense*, 2-4.

1.b The history of the Dionysian texts

Louis Dupré has asserted the need for a historical understanding in analysing religious ideas, particularly mystical ideas,

Religious categories are not trans-historical concepts: they originate in specific religious cultures and develop within those cultures. There is no mysticism; there are only mystics and specific mystical theologies. This is not to deny the existence of a common element in the variety of experience. Indeed, one of philosophy's main tasks is precisely to discover this element – but on the actual texts in their historical setting.²⁴

Dupré's point about how religious categories develop within cultures can be supported by an overview of the use of the Dionysian texts in the history of ideas. The key apophatic texts of Dionysius, including *The Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names*, have a complex authorial history.²⁵ The belief that the texts were written by Dionysius the Areopagite, to whom reference is made in Acts, and hence were part of a 'subapostolic' tradition, was refuted by the 16th century, and the significance of this 'fraud' and its exposure has changed our reading of the texts today.²⁶ The refutation of the claim of authorship by the Areopagite influenced the popularity of, and degree of respect for, these texts, especially in the Protestant tradition. Indeed, as Froelich points out, the very dispute over authorship of the texts became part of the debate over the nature of church authority in the minds of the

²⁴ Dupré, 'Mystical Experience', 449.

²⁵ As explained in the introduction, I shall not be focusing on either the *Celestial Hierarchy* or the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* in this thesis; rather it is the key elements of Dionysian epistemology in *Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names* that will be compared and contrasted with the modern rationalist epistemology and ethics of Nagel in chapters 3 and 4.

²⁶ It is important not to see the pseudonymous works of the past through modern eyes – what we would call forgery is an altogether more complicated phenomenon and there are many other examples in addition to the Dionysius texts; many of the great authors of the Christian tradition have had many inauthentic works ascribed to them. See Jaroslav Pelikan, 'The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality', in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhead (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987: 11-24), 11. See also C.E. Rolt's introduction to his translation of *The Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names*, in Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, trans. C.E. Rolt (London: SPCK, 1940), 1-2.

Reformers, for whom to defend the authority of the texts was to defend the authority of the Roman tradition.²⁷

The Dionysian texts had the attention of key theological commentators in the Latin West from the 12th century until the refutation of their authority in the 16th century, and this fact is partly responsible for the esteem in which the texts have been held in the history of spirituality and theology. However, another explanation for the importance of the writings of Dionysius in the Latin West in the late Middle Ages can be advanced by comparing the relative insignificance of Dionysius in the East. Jaroslav Pelikan suggests that this insignificance can be explained by the fact that many of the Neoplatonic ideas in Dionysius can be found in other works that were commonplace in the Eastern spiritual tradition, including the writings of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa.²⁸ For despite the use of Neoplatonic ideas by both Augustine and Boethius, the main vehicle for Neoplatonic ideas in the West was the Dionysian texts.²⁹ So when considering the historical context of the Dionysian texts, we must also consider their role in the promulgation of Neoplatonic ideas in the Latin Christian tradition.³⁰

There are few references to the Dionysian texts until the 10th and 11th centuries.³¹

The texts were spread in the West mainly through Eriugena's Latin translation of 862,³² but the monastic orders of the time – Benedictine, Cistercian and Carthusian

²⁷ Froelich makes the point that the denial of the authority of Dionysius' texts, and their subsequent decline in influence is only part of the story, for the texts retained their place as a source of interest among the humanists and therefore continued to have an influence among those adhering to the 'old faith and the new'. Froelich, 'Pseudo-Dionysius', 34.

²⁸ See Pelikan, 'Odyssey', 24. Paul Rorem also makes the point that medieval authors, unaware of the 'double tradition' of negative theology among the Christian and non-Christian Platonists, saw Dionysius as the founder of this tradition with an apostolic authority. See Rorem, *Commentary*, 124.

²⁹ Augustine's Neoplatonism is also, of course, highly significant in the Latin tradition, but Pelikan believes it was the *interaction* of Augustinian and Dionysian Neoplatonism that led to the rich thought of Bonaventure and Aquinas. See Pelikan, 'Odyssey', 24.

³⁰ Istvan Perczel has pointed out that the works of Dionysius allowed the 'spiritual' element of Origenism to be accepted in the East even when Origen's metaphysical orthodoxy was questioned. See Istvan Perczel, 'The Earliest Syriac Reception of Dionysius', in Coakley and Stang, *Re-thinking*, 27-41: 36.

³¹ See Jean Leclercq, 'Influence and noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages' in *Pseudo-Dionysius: Complete Works*, 26-32: 27.

³² See Rorem, *Commentary*, 215. Rorem sees the translation of Dionysian texts in the ninth century by the Irish Monk Eriugena as the beginning of the significant influence of Dionysius in the West, though the commentaries of both Maximus the Confessor and John Damascene had continued the tradition of Dionysian unknowing before this. Eriugena's *Periphyseon*, a synthesis of Augustinian and Dionysian ideas, was rediscovered in the twelfth century.

– made little use of the writings of Dionysius, despite evidence that they possessed translations.³³ It was not until the 12th century that the influence of Dionysian thought began to grow in the main monastic traditions. Leclercq³⁴ has described how, by the 13th century, the mysticism of the Dionysian tradition was used by Aquinas and Bonaventure, among others, to ‘balance’ the theology of scholasticism.³⁵

However, it is the use of the Dionysian texts by Rhineland theologians in the 14th and 15th century that has given Dionysian ideas a major place in the history of spirituality. Reference to Dionysius was widespread: Eckhart, Tauler, Ruysbroeck, Gerson, Nicolas of Cusa, Denis the Carthusian and Ficino all adapted Dionysian themes within their own systems of mystical thought.³⁶ In an English context, it is also important to include the anonymous work *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which was contemporary with the time of the flowering of Rhineland spirituality. This has been shown to be a reinterpretation of Dionysian ideas using a dichotomy between love and knowledge that is alien to aspects of the Neoplatonic origins of the Dionysian texts, as I shall argue below, but it has nonetheless kept many Dionysian concepts alive in some form up until the present day.³⁷

The humanist interest in Platonism and ancient Greek thought from the 15th century onwards included both a focus on the authorial authenticity of the Dionysian texts and an interest in their content. Spirituality within the Roman tradition continued to be heavily influenced by Dionysius, and the Dionysian texts were an important reference point in the ‘golden age’ of Spanish mysticism in the 16th and 17th centuries and a key influence on John of the Cross and the Carmelite school of the 17th and 18th centuries.³⁸ The history of Pseudo-Dionysian texts and their reception

³³ See Leclercq, ‘Influence’, 27. Istvan Perczel has also explained that the original Greek text of Dionysian works was lost and that what we rely upon are texts which we read through the ‘veils’ of ‘redactions, receptions and adaptations, which have assimilated the original thought to their own milieu and times’. Perczel is, however, convinced that the most ‘transparent veil’ is that of the (first) Syriac reception. See Perczel, ‘Earliest Syriac Reception’, 35.

³⁴ See Leclercq, ‘Influence’, 29-31.

³⁵ See also the discussion on the use by Aquinas of Dionysian ideas in Turner, *Faith*, particularly his discussion of how Aquinas used apophaticism to construct a tension between the apophatic and cataphatic within both faith and reason in chapter 4.

³⁶ See Leclercq, ‘Influence’, 30.

³⁷ I shall discuss *The Cloud of Unknowing* in section 1.d below.

³⁸ See Leclercq, ‘Influence’, 30.

in the Protestant tradition is, however, a different story. Martin Luther's response to the texts is characteristic of their declining influence in certain schools of theology after the Reformation, shifting from engagement with the texts as part of his monastic training to rejection of their authorial authority as fraudulent, and finally to deep suspicion. By the time Luther rejected Dionysius in the 1520s, many of his main opponents among the humanists of the time were staunch defenders of the Dionysian texts. Calvin and other Protestant reformers had no hesitation in relegating the texts of Dionysius to a subset of a platonising influence within Christianity that needed rooting out.³⁹

Luther and the reformers held that pursuing the path of contemplation outlined in *The Mystical Theology* was an act of intellectual pride, and hence a sin, for such a path assumed it was possible for fallen human beings to have direct knowledge of God without the mediation of the Cross.⁴⁰ This is, however, a very particular interpretation of *The Mystical Theology*, which ignores the warning in its first chapter for those who 'think that by their own intellectual resources they can have a direct knowledge of him who has made the shadows his hiding place'. This warning is aimed at both those 'caught up with the things of the world' and those (who the author says should really know better) who 'describe the transcendent Cause of all things in terms derived from the lowest orders of being and who claim that it is in no way superior to the godless, multiformed shapes they themselves have made'. The author goes on to explain how God is beyond all affirmations *and all denials*. 'What has actually to be said about the Cause of everything there is. Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and more appropriately we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being.' These negations however cannot 'capture' the transcendence in themselves, as 'the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.'⁴¹ A similar caveat is made in *The*

³⁹ See Froelich, 'Pseudo-Dionysius', 44.

⁴⁰ See Froelich 'Pseudo Dionysius', 44, where he quotes from Luther's 'Disputation' of 18 December 1537: 'They [the mystical theologians] taught that humans can converse and deal with the inscrutable, eternal majesty of God in this mortal, corrupt flesh without mediation [...] I admonish you to shun like the plague that "Mystical Theology" of Dionysius and similar books which contain such idle talk.'

⁴¹ *The Mystical Theology*, 136. See further discussion of the relationship of assertions and denials in the second part of this chapter.

Divine Names when it is asserted that ‘the inscrutable One is out of the reach of every rational process’ and it alone can give an account of what it really is.⁴² Indeed Piotr J. Malysz maintains that, despite his eventual rejection of the tradition, Luther’s own theological development contains important apophatic elements.⁴³ Luther’s translation and promotion of the *Theologia Germanica*, with its emphasis on self-surrender to make room for the living and present God, and the consequential imperative to act humbly, could perhaps be seen as a bridge between these two stages in his thought.⁴⁴ Diarmaid MacCulloch has suggested that Luther ‘radically reapplied’ the principle of *Gelassenheit* (detachment as understood as letting go/cutting off/utter abandonment of the self), with which he would have been familiar through his engagement with not only the *Theologia Germanica* but also the works of Meister Eckhart, to the logic of justification by faith. Hence justification included a letting-go of guilt, but also significantly included a turn towards activity, a ‘surrender to the power of God which in turn was manifested in an active life in the world, not by any unhealthy descent into the nothingness beyond prayer’.⁴⁵

Ernst Troeltsch, the late 19th-/early 20th-century sociologist of the Church, explained how Protestant mysticism after the Reformation actually *continued* the focus on the interior life and a direct experience of salvation present within the Mediaeval spirituality influenced by apophaticism.⁴⁶ Other commentators on the history of Christian spirituality, including Timothy George, have also drawn out the continuation of ideas in Mediaeval mysticism through the development of a radical

⁴² *The Divine Names*, 49-50.

⁴³ In his essay ‘Luther and Dionysius’ Malysz disagrees with Bernard McGinn that the comparison between Luther and Dionysius is ‘little more than an exercise in contrasts’, making the case that ‘Luther’s strongly Christological emphasis did not preclude the reformer from espousing a doctrine of God that, like that of Dionysius, relied on immediacy unfolding itself within a non-spatiotemporal dialectic of distance and nearness.’ Piotr J. Malysz, ‘Luther and Dionysius: Beyond Mere Negations’, in Coakley and Stang, *Re-thinking Dionysius*, 149-61: 160. Malysz also argues that attempts at a more Christological reading of the Dionysian texts had been going on for a millennium before Luther.

⁴⁴ My thanks to Oliver Davies for this suggestion. See also the introduction to the text by Bengt Hoffman, in *The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther*, trans. Bengt Hoffman (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980).

⁴⁵ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 135.

⁴⁶ See Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, Vol. 2, chapter 3, part 4, where he deals with ‘the complementary movement of the sects and of mysticism alongside of the Protestant Territorial Church System, and the original inclusion of both these elements in the Reformation world of thought’. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1931), 740.

piety amongst Reformers such as the Annabaptists, Hussarites, and Menno Simons.⁴⁷ He has pointed out that these continuities meant that the radical Reformers were themselves accused of ‘works-righteousness’, and persecuted for it.⁴⁸ George explains that the radical Reformation tradition included a more extreme interpretation of the practice of piety, called the way of the ‘bitter Christ’, which included *Gelassenheit*. This act of self-abandonment, the ‘letting-loose-of-oneself’ was embedded in a theology of suffering. It was an imitation of Christ that demanded a profound inward submission as well as outward conformity.⁴⁹ Richard Woods, too, draws attention to the continuing influence of Meister Eckhart on radical Reformers who adopted the ‘Gentle Way’.⁵⁰ Woods identifies Eckhart’s approach as recognition that ‘the appropriate response to deprivation and misery is not spiritual romanticism, but a real and practical concern for the poor based on simplicity of life, frugality and generosity’.⁵¹

To conclude this brief outline of historical context, it is necessary to bring the real author of the writings of Dionysius into the picture at this point. It is now generally accepted that the real Dionysius was probably a Syrian monk who lived sometime around the end of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth centuries CE. The first

⁴⁷ See Timothy George, ‘The Spirituality of the Radical Reformation’, in Jill Raitt, Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff, ed., *Christian Spirituality II: High Middle Ages and Reformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1987). The Radical Reformers can be categorised into groupings of Anabaptists (of the evangelical, revolutionary, and contemplative kind), Spiritualists and Evangelical Rationalists. See George, ‘Spirituality’, p. 334, where he explains that he is following the categorisations of these groupings proposed by Troeltsch and George H. Williams.

⁴⁸ Jill Raitt’s analysis differs from that of George and Troeltsch, in that she does not see Luther’s theology as any sort of bridge from the pre-Reformation mystical traditions to the piety of the Radical reformation. See ‘Saints and Sinners: Roman Catholic and Protestant Spirituality in the Sixteenth Century’, in Raitt, McGinn and Meyendorff, *Christian Spirituality II*, especially 461. Raitt suggests that the Radical Reformers’ approach to following Christ crucified – following the ‘bitter Christ’ – was intensified by their actual persecution by Lutherans. For more on their following of the ‘bitter Christ’, see George, ‘Spirituality’ in the same volume, and also commentary in Jean Leclercq, François Vandenbroucke and Louis Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality, vol. 2: The Spirituality of the Middle Ages* (London: Burns & Oates, 1982).

⁴⁹ George points out (and Raitt is in agreement on this point) that there are obvious connections between such a concept of selfless surrender and the experience of martyrdom that was a part of the lives of 16th-century radical reformers. See above.

⁵⁰ See Richard Woods, *Meister Eckhart: Master of Mystics* (London: Continuum, 2011), 94.

⁵¹ Woods, *Meister Eckhart*, 94-95. Woods sees this approach as having a timeless appeal and being compatible with Catholic social teaching on the Church in the modern world, especially after Vatican 2, and also with Liberation Theology.

recorded mention of him is when his authority was invoked in theological disputes in the sixth century.⁵²

To summarise: the texts of Dionysius have had a mixed history in terms of popularity and the nature of interest in them. Whilst the supposed apostolic authority of the texts enhanced their status,⁵³ Andrew Louth makes the observation that pseudonymity usually succeeds if it reflects what people already believe.⁵⁴ What is clear is that the ideas contained in the Dionysian texts acquired such purchase in the Western tradition that they were propelled from discussions on the fringes of Christian Eastern Orthodoxy to the focus of debate within the very heart of Western orthodoxy. They have therefore occupied a changing position over different phases of theology and spirituality, which includes their use by Aquinas in the scholastic tradition and the interweaving of apophatic concepts with natural theology,⁵⁵ their place in the flowering of Rhineland mysticism in the later middle ages, which provided new and rich spiritual resources for the Western Christian tradition, their role in the development of early humanism, and their significance as a criterion in the division of the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. In a nutshell, the history of the use of the Dionysian texts is one of writings that have had different roles at different times and have crossed the boundaries between spirituality, theology and philosophy.

⁵² Pelikan, 'Odyssey', 13. Pelikan makes the point that the earliest references to the *Corpus Areopagiticum* appear in arguments by Severians in 532 against the orthodox supporters of the Council of Chalcedon (451). There was an attempt by the Severians to claim Dionysius as a Patristic tradition that would underpin the Monophysite doctrine of the one nature of God the Logos. Despite the fact that his writings were used to justify Monophysite doctrines, von Balthasar has argued that Dionysius' Monophysite tendencies have not been proven historically, although his monoenergism has. See the discussion on orthodoxy in the section below, and also in Pelikan, 'Odyssey', 20-21, referring to Hans von Balthasar's 'Scholienwerk', p 17.

⁵³ See Pelikan, 'Odyssey', 21, where he describes how the Dionysian texts moved from the heretical fringes of Eastern Christianity to being revered in the Latin West. He makes a useful comparison of the different ways posterity has dealt with Pope Honorius (as someone who was hereticised by the Third Council of Constantinople in 681) and Dionysius, despite their similarities in dissent from official doctrine.

⁵⁴ Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 23.

⁵⁵ Pelikan estimates that Aquinas quotes Dionysius 1,700 times. Pelikan, 'Odyssey', 21.

1.c The question of orthodoxy

There is disagreement among scholars on the degree of orthodoxy of the Dionysian texts. In dispute are the relative levels of influence of early church traditions of scriptural interpretation and eucharistic liturgy on the one hand, and Neoplatonic theory on the other, in the formation of Dionysian thought. There is greater consensus on the debt of the texts to the conceptual framework of Neoplatonism, and specifically to the thought of Plotinus, than there is on how ‘Christian’ Dionysius is. This debate centres on whether the Dionysian apophatic tradition represents the ‘importing’ of Neoplatonism into Christianity, or whether Dionysian apophaticism is Christianity with a pronounced Neoplatonic bias.⁵⁶ Contemporary commentators on the Dionysian tradition have differing views that I shall briefly consider in this section.

The debate about orthodoxy has focused on specific doctrines. Jaroslav Pelikan discussed the allegation that Dionysius was a Monophysite in his essay ‘The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality.’⁵⁷ Pelikan explains how theologians such as Baur and von Harnack have accused Dionysius of not acknowledging the historical nature of the incarnation. His own view, however, is that though Dionysius could be fairly described as a ‘Monoenergist’, it is not historically proven that he is a Monophysite.⁵⁸ MacCulloch, on the other hand, is happy to describe Dionysius as a Miaphysite (Monophysite) whose views were not only divergent from the main precepts of Chalcedonian Christianity, but also on the ‘polar opposite wing’ of dissent to those in the Dyophysite Church of the East such as Isaac of Nineveh and John of Dalyatha.⁵⁹ However, other commentators appear to bend over backwards to claim Dionysius as part of orthodox Christian doctrine, even to the extent of modifying his Neoplatonism.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ See Pelikan, ‘Odyssey’, 20.

⁵⁷ Pelikan, ‘Odyssey’.

⁵⁸ Pelikan, ‘Odyssey’, 20.

⁵⁹ See MacCulloch, *Silence*, 86-87. MacCulloch suggests that the pseudonymity of Dionysius, though obviously a conscious reference to the tradition of the ‘unknown God’ in Platonist and Greek thought, was politic – locating the claim for authority four centuries before the Council of Chalcedon.

⁶⁰ For example, see William Johnston's commentary on the Dionysian idea of the nature of mystical union. William Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Desclee, 1967), 211-215.

Louis Bouyer does not deny the links between Dionysius thought and the use of Neoplatonist concepts, but insists that the ‘mystical’ aspects of Dionysius derive from a Christian tradition of scriptural interpretation and the ecclesiastical experience of the eucharistic liturgy. Bouyer argues that the fact that the Greek word *mustikos*, which he translates as ‘mystical’, is not present in the *Enneads* is proof that the ‘mystical’ aspect of Dionysian apophatic thought was a development of Patristic, not Neoplatonic thought.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the absence of the word *mustikos* may not be conclusive proof, if we are to accept the view of Sara Rappe, who asserts that mystical practices are assumed in the *Enneads*.⁶² As we will discuss further below, de Certeau has established that ‘mystical’ as an epistemological category only arose when mystical texts were differentiated from other texts in the early modern period, centuries after Dionysius.⁶³ Bouyer appears to be reading back into the Dionysian texts our modern separation of the mystical from the philosophical. In a more pertinent observation on the Dionysian apophatic tradition, however, Bouyer asserts the importance of the Byzantine conception of the liturgy, particularly the Eucharist, as a necessary context for our understanding of Dionysian ideas – something we will consider below.⁶⁴

Eric Perl makes a different point about the orthodoxy of the Dionysian texts, one that reminds us of their Eastern origins:

⁶¹ See Louis Bouyer, ‘Mysticism: An essay on the History of the Word’, in Richard Woods, ed., *Understanding Mysticism* (London: Athlone, 1981), 52-53, where Bouyer explains the usage of *mustikos* in Patristic thought. His argument is, I feel, inconclusive, for the use by Dionysius of the Greek word ‘*mustikos*’ in the sense of ‘something hidden’ comes from the Greek tradition, even if this was subsequently developed in new directions in early Christianity. The lack of *mustikos* in Plotinus is not sufficient evidence of a distinctive Patristic origin of specific mystical aspects of Dionysian thought, precisely because at the time the mystical and the philosophical were not seen as separate. Both Bouyer and Andrew Louth (see his *Denys the Areopagite*) assert the importance of the context of the Byzantine conception of the Eucharist for the Dionysian texts. See also note 56 below.

⁶² See Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, Preface, where she asserts that ritual and symbolism were presumed by Plotinus even if there are no explicit reference to in the text of the *Enneads*.

⁶³ See the discussion in section 2.a below on the development of an instrumentalist spirituality.

⁶⁴ In section 2.b below (and note 101). See Andrew Louth, *Denys*, especially chapter 2: ‘for it is the liturgy, and the understanding of Scriptures that are read and expounded in the liturgy and in which the language of the liturgy is drenched, that is the fundamental context for Denys.’ Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 30. Sheldrake also notes that the importance of the Byzantine tradition, particularly the communal roots of Dionysian concepts, has been stressed within the Orthodox tradition in more recent times, notably in the work of Vladimir Lossky. Sheldrake *Spirituality and Theology*, 200. Lossky insists that ‘mystical individualism’ has remained alien to the spirituality of the Eastern Church. See Lossky, ‘Theology and Mysticism’.

Dionysius represents precisely those doctrines which are most typical of Orthodoxy in distinction from the West: creation as theophany; grace as continuous with nature; knowledge as union of knower and known; incarnation and sacrament as fulfilment, not exception or addition; liturgy as the realisation of the cosmos; mysticism as ontological union rather than psychological condition; sin as corruption and loss of being, not legalistic transgression; atonement as physical-ontological assumption, not justification or juridicial satisfaction; hierarchy as service and love, not oppression and envy.⁶⁵

Paul Rorem has further suggested that the fraudulent apostolic authority of Pseudo-Dionysius, and hence the high status of the texts, meant that mediaeval commentators (East and West) ‘read’ orthodox Christian concepts into the texts, even though they are not there explicitly – a view that appears to undermine those who see Dionysius as firmly located in the liturgical and incarnational understandings of Christianity. Rorem maintains that ‘in Dionysius, Neoplatonism’s timeless procession and return was given a chronological and eschatological bent in the direction of Christianity’s history of creation, incarnation and final salvation.’⁶⁶ Modern scholarship, however, has shown that the range of biblical references and allusions in the texts is much greater than previously acknowledged, and in the Dionysian texts Neoplatonic structures are applied to central Christian doctrines of the trinity, the soul, and love.⁶⁷ This intermingling of Neoplatonic ideas, Christian doctrine and scriptural motifs can be seen as having roots in the Patristic tradition of ‘Christian philosophy’, where scriptural stories were interwoven with philosophical ideas of contemplation.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Eric Perl, ‘Symbol, Sacrament and Hierarchy in St Dionysius the Areopagite’, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39 (1994): 311-56, quoted in Paul L. Gavrilyuk, ‘The Reception of Dionysius in Twentieth Century Eastern Orthodoxy’, in Coakley and Stang, *Re-thinking*, 188-89.

⁶⁶ Rorem, *Commentary*, 238.

⁶⁷ Colm Luibheid’s translation contains a more comprehensive set of scriptural references and allusions than the previous modern translations of C.E. Rolt and J. Jones. See *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, 47.

⁶⁸ A good example of this intermingling is the application of the Neoplatonic conception of spiral, based on the model of procession and return, to the movement of the soul: ‘Whenever the soul receives [...] the enlightenment of divine knowledge [...] through discursive reasoning [...] then it moves in a spiral fashion. And its movement is in a straight line when, instead of circling in upon its own intelligent unity [...] it proceeds to the things around it, and is uplifted from external things, as from certain variegated and pluralised symbols, to the simple and united contemplations. *The Divine Names*, 78. See also Pierre Hadot, ‘Christian philosophy’ in Hadot, *Philosophy*.

Roore maintains that the influence of Neoplatonic ideas flowed through the structure of procession and return in *The Divine Names*, to become a literary motif prevalent in theological and spiritual works of the Latin Middle Ages.⁶⁹ Without an appreciation of the contexts of both scriptural references and allusions and the Neoplatonic philosophical framework, metaphors and use of certain Neoplatonic technical terms, our understanding of the texts would be poorer.⁷⁰ We need this dual understanding, for example, where attempts are made in the texts to marry a scripturally based conception of the incarnation with Neoplatonic ontology.⁷¹

Mark McIntosh has questioned whether the use by Dionysius of Neoplatonic concepts eventually undermined Christian liturgical context of apophaticism, and has asked whether the Dionysian adoption of Neoplatonist ideas was ‘the thin end of the wedge that pried Christian spirituality loose from its communal, scriptural moorings.’⁷² In my discussions of the affective turn and of interiority below, I suggest an alternative explanation for the development of a more individualistic contemplative practice based on the historical development of the social role of the individual, rather than primarily the influence of Neoplatonist ideas.⁷³

These debates about the orthodoxy of Dionysian ideas have affected the development of Christian tradition, particularly in the assessment of thinkers from the Middle Ages when the scholarly influence of these texts was at its height. Subsequent doubts about the orthodoxy of Dionysian ideas amongst theologians and church authorities has meant that there has been little acknowledgement of the influence of Dionysian ideas on important theologians of the time, including Thomas

⁶⁹ Roore, *Commentary*, 167-74. So much so that they have become ‘Christian’?

⁷⁰ See the use (and interestingly the qualification of the use) of the concept of ‘remaining’ as the Neoplatonic term *mone*, and of ‘sympathy’ (which also has a qualification in the text because of its implicit Neoplatonic theurgy), in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, pp. 61 and 65.

⁷¹ These include the following: ‘The simplicity of Jesus became something complex, the timeless took on the duration of the temporal and, with neither change nor confusion of what constitutes him, he came into our human nature, he who totally transcends the natural order of the world.’ (*Divine Names*, 52; and ‘the divinity of Jesus is the fulfilling cause of all, and the parts of that divinity are so related to the whole that it is neither whole nor part while being at the same time both whole and part. Within its total unity it contains part and whole, and it transcends these two and is antecedent to them’ (*Divine Names*, 65). There is also further discussion of Jesus’ nature in references to the lost Dionysian text ‘The Theological Representations’: see *Mystical Theology*, 138-139.

⁷² McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 45.

⁷³ In section 1e. This shift of focus towards an inner spirituality (and the development of an instrumentalist spirituality and spiritual positivism) will be discussed more fully in sections 2.a and 2.b below.

Aquinas.⁷⁴ Whilst Thomist scholarship of the past has minimised the Neoplatonic and Dionysian influence on his systematic theology because of doubts about the orthodoxy of Dionysian ideas, this bias is beginning to be redressed, for example in the work of Denys Turner.⁷⁵

I wish to now focus on two of the main changes in the use of the Dionysian texts during the Middle Ages that have helped to shape our understanding up to our present day. I shall begin by looking at their use as a justification for an emphasis on love rather than knowledge in the development of Christian spirituality, which has been described as the ‘affective turn’.

1.d The affective turn

The affective reading of Dionysian texts that emerged at the end of the Middle Ages was one of several mediaeval attempts to resolve the question of the relationship between love and knowledge – a question that can be considered as important as that of the relationship between faith and reason. This is the question I will be considering in this section, and to do this I shall focus on the anonymous English mystical text *The Cloud of Unknowing*.⁷⁶ For as we have established above,⁷⁷ after the 13th-century interpretation and rewriting of Dionysian texts by Thomas Gallus of the Victorine school, the influence of Dionysian ideas took two different directions, ‘affective’ and ‘intellectual’.⁷⁸ This dual development has had far-reaching

⁷⁴ See Rorem, *Commentary*, 168, and also 174, where he notes the work of Wayne Hankey and discusses how, if his interpretation of Thomas is correct, it has consequences for our understanding of the development of theology far beyond specifics in Aquinas’ thought.

⁷⁵ In both *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* and *Aquinas*.

⁷⁶ Boyd Taylor Coolman has argued that the ‘medieval interpolation of love over knowledge is produced by the convergence of two theological traditions flowing through the Western Middle Ages: the (Augustinian) assumption that God is fully known and loved in a beatific *visio dei* which is the goal of human existence, and the (Dionysian) insistence that God is radically and transcendently unknowable.’ Boyd Talor Coolman, ‘The Medieval Affective Dionysian Tradition’, in Coakley and Stang, *Re-thinking*, 85.

⁷⁷ See my introduction.

⁷⁸ Rorem, *Commentary*, 216-19. Gallus’ translation was used by the Victorine school and subsequently by the author of *The Cloud*. Denys Turner explains how *The Cloud* author’s translation of *The Mystical Theology* ‘reinforces Gallus’ shift of emphasis from the intellectualism of Denys’ “mysticism of vision” toward the voluntarism of his own “mysticism of affectivity”.’ Turner, *Darkness*, 187. See also Bernard McGinn’s summation of the influence of Gallus as combining ‘Dionysian apophaticism with an affective reading of the Song of Songs to form a potent new mystical theory that had a major influence in the later Middle Ages’. Bernard McGinn, ‘Thomas

consequences for our modern understanding of Christian apophatic mysticism and its relationship to reason. In the next section, I will explore the use of the Dionysian texts in justifying the move away from communal practice to interiority (an ‘inner spirituality’) in the development of the apophatic tradition.

In *The Divine Names* explicit reference is made to the superiority of ‘yearning’ (*eros*) over ‘love’ (*agape*), countering those who see the former as less scripturally based.⁷⁹ However the reinterpretation of Dionysian ideas by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* in the 14th century is evidence of a switch to the affective stream in the Dionysian apophatic tradition. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is an anonymous English mystical text contemporary with the development of Rhineland mysticism in Northern Europe.⁸⁰ Philip Sheldrake, along with Paul Rorem, sees the influence of Thomas Gallus as decisive in this reinterpretation of the Dionysian understanding of unknowing by the author of *The Cloud*.⁸¹ One can see this reinterpretation by the author of *The Cloud* as part of a wider change in the place of the apophatic within mediaeval mysticism, for it was the translation of Gallus that was adopted by the Victorine school of the 12th century, and the resulting development of an affective tradition of Dionysian-based thought, that brought apophaticism into the mainstream of medieval mysticism.⁸² However, this reading of the Dionysian texts – which fails to acknowledge the central place of reason within them – leads to a distorted understanding of their epistemology.

Philip Sheldrake has described the consequences of the changes made by the author of *The Cloud* to Dionysian epistemological categories. The first change, placing knowing below loving, means that the emotional is given greater importance than the rational in our human religious understanding. Limiting reason in this way is at

Gallus and Dionysian spirituality’, *Studies in Spirituality* 8 (1998), 82, quoted in Coolman, ‘Medieval’.

⁷⁹ ‘Let no one imagine that in giving status to the term “yearning” I am running counter to scripture’: *The Divine Names*, 80.

⁸⁰ According to A.C. Spearing, the author of *The Cloud* was an English priest, probably a Carthusian monk writing in the second half of the 14th century. See his introduction to *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, trans. A.C. Spearing (London: Penguin, 2001).

⁸¹ See Rorem, *Commentary*, 217-19

⁸² See Rorem, *Commentary*, 217-19. Rorem argues that this appropriation of Dionysian ideas into the mainstream necessarily gave rise to other reinterpretations, including of Moses’ love of God as true knowledge, and a conflation of Dionysian darkness with Solomon’s lovesick night. Rorem sees these reinterpretations as an attempt to harmonise Dionysian ideas with biblical and spiritual tradition.

variance with the Dionysian conception of the intellect, which, negatively, points the way to God.⁸³ The second change, that of conflating loving with unknowing, means that an element of anti-intellectualism is introduced, a danger identified by Turner and others, as we will discuss further below.⁸⁴ In this conflation of unknowing with loving, unknowing is appropriated for the non-rational approach to religious experience. So love, which is not mentioned at all in *The Mystical Theology*, is used in the affective interpretation of Dionysian ideas to undermine the importance of knowledge in our relationship to God.

In chapter 6 of *The Cloud of Unknowing* the author asserts:

[Of] God himself no one can think. And so I wish to give up everything that I can think, and choose as my love the one thing that I cannot think. For he can well be loved, but he cannot be thought. By love he can be grasped and held, but by thought neither grasped nor held. And therefore, though it may be good at times to think specifically of the kindness and excellence of God, and though this may be a light and a part of contemplation, all the same, in the work of contemplation itself, it must be cast down and covered with a cloud of forgetting. And you must step above it stoutly but deftly, with a devout and delightful stirring of love, and struggle to pierce that darkness above you; and beat on that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love, and do not give up, whatever happens.⁸⁵

Whilst this mixed interpretation of Dionysian epistemology within the affective tradition of Christian apophaticism was resisted by thinkers in the ‘intellectual’ stream, such as Meister Eckhart, this did not mean a rejection of the validity of human emotions or human loving actions, as we shall see in later parts of this thesis.⁸⁶ Louth sees the important epistemological adaptation of Dionysius by the author of *The Cloud* as a reinterpretation of the Dionysian idea of divine darkness to justify a doctrine that seeks to renounce intellectual effort as a way to God. Instead,

⁸³ I will discuss further the idea of the negative *telos* of the intellect in section 3.a. below

⁸⁴ See section 2.b of this chapter for my discussion of the anti-intellectualism implied by the affective turn.

⁸⁵ *Cloud*, chapter 6.

⁸⁶ When we discuss the ethical implications of Eckhart’s epistemology in chapter 6.

the author of *The Cloud* relies on the ‘sharp dart of longing love’, that is the loving power of the soul.⁸⁷ In the affective tradition of Dionysian apophaticism, then, we see apophatic ideas being used as a theoretical justification for a *spirituality* of love rather than *theology* of knowledge.⁸⁸

There are parallels in the separation of the ‘affective’ and ‘intellectual’ streams of Dionysian tradition with the separation of the subject matter of faith from knowledge in the modern period, and a subsequent separation of private ‘inner’ spirituality from the externalities of public life. This is the subject to which we now turn.

1.e The move to ‘inner’ devotion

Sheldrake has described how in the late Middle Ages spirituality became more focused on the individual interior experience of faith, and how inner spirituality became increasingly separated from public demonstrations of faith.⁸⁹ The affective turn within Dionysian apophaticism led to an experiential bias in the development of the tradition. This new focus interacted with liturgy and spiritual practices, leading to a greater emphasis on private rather than public life. Sheldrake suggests that this change laid the ground for the separation of private faith from public reasoning in our modern age through the development of a modern sense of spirituality as primarily a matter of ‘inner’ experience and private practice, a shift also identified by Louis Dupré.⁹⁰ Whilst the practice of contemplation in the Dionysian tradition is indeed introspective, this introspection is not the same as the emphasis on inner, private space developed in our modern understanding of spirituality such as that of

⁸⁷As we have seen in chapter 6 of *The Cloud* quoted above

⁸⁸ See Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 125.

⁸⁹ ‘Although late medieval religion was not completely individualistic (the growth of lay confraternities is evidence of the importance of collective experience) there is no doubt that religious practice became more personalised and internalised.’ Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology*, 41-42.

⁹⁰ See also Louis Dupré on ‘Truth in Religion and the Truth of Religion’, chapter 2 of *Religious Mystery*, where he comments on the breaking down of the synthesis between faith and reason after nominalism and the resulting gradual separation of experience from faith: ‘in the traditional view religious truth originated in some sort of participation in the revealed mystery of divine. The human subject, now the source of truth [in our modern times], was then no more than a receptacle endowed with divine potential for apprehending the truth as divinely revealed [...] In the early centuries faith, far from being opposed to experiential evidence, was never considered complete without it; later it came to occupy an order of its own with a minimum of experiential content. Experience became the privilege of a spiritual elite – the so-called “mystics”.’

Christian meditation, ‘centring prayer’, mindfulness and other meditative techniques.⁹¹

The experiential emphasis in the affective interpretation of Dionysian apophaticism, following on from the Victorine School, had roots in the monastic tradition, with Bernard of Clairvaux as an exemplar. However, this experiential emphasis caused tensions within the Dionysian tradition. Turner has explained that Eckhart (and indeed the author of *The Cloud*) opposed any reliance on experiences of inwardness, seeing these as irrelevant to the essence of the apophaticism of the Dionysian tradition.⁹² Arguing the same point, McIntosh points out that, in the development of Dionysian apophaticism in the affective tradition, ‘complex and polyvalent’ language – which includes describing the transcendence of experience – came to be understood as describing the experiences themselves.⁹³ The inner self became the focus of spirituality, rather than spirituality being concerned with the transcendence of the self. In the final chapters of this thesis I shall focus on this apophatic conception of self-transcendence and its implications for ethics and politics, which are very different from the ethical implications of a spirituality focused on an ‘inner self’.

The changes in the understanding of the self in the apophatic tradition, then, have to be seen in both an ecclesiastical and a social context. As we have seen above in the discussion on orthodoxy, Dionysian apophaticism exists within a wider tradition of liturgy and scripture. However, ecclesiastical tradition is itself part of the development of the history of ideas, and ideas about liturgy and worship have an economic and political context, including the development of the modern concept of the individual. The changing role of apophatic ideas we have discussed in this chapter, then, has to be considered in this broader historical context. As we have seen above the Dionysian texts, mostly reinterpreted in an affective direction,

⁹¹ Christian Meditation and Centring prayer are terms used to describe contemplative practice by particular organisations in contemporary Catholic spirituality (WCCM and Contemplative Outreach). Techniques of mindfulness and meditation cut across particular denominations and religious (and non-religious) tradition. See note 2 above on ‘spirituality’.

⁹² See Turner, *Darkness*, especially chapters 7 and 8. Turner concludes by making the point that both reject ‘spiritual experientialism’ and that it is better to understand the path of author of *The Cloud* as one of ‘ordinary means plus detachment’. Turner, *Darkness*, 210.

⁹³ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 67-68.

represented a major theological reference for the flowering of mysticism that took place in the 13th and 14th centuries. This burgeoning mysticism can, however, as Colin Morris has shown, be linked to changes in the role of the individual in society in the 11th and 12th centuries, and reflected in the 12th-century Renaissance.⁹⁴ In his study *The Discovery of the Individual*, Morris highlights a shift in focus, from preoccupation with the salvation of humanity to the deliverance of the individual, and from cosmic expectation to personal piety, and suggests that this shift prefigures the modern concentration of faith on the individual's experience and self-knowledge.⁹⁵ McIntosh has also described how the affective turn of the late Middle Ages led to a concept of self that is identified more with 'internal' experiences than with its place in the communal, or indeed cosmic, order.⁹⁶ We can see how the affective turn, with its experiential bias and concept of inner spiritual life, fits closely with this historical change.

Summary

As we have seen the ideas of Dionysius, which include claims about the role of reason and presume complex philosophical and theological concepts, do not fit neatly within the modern categorisation of spirituality, or indeed mysticism.⁹⁷ Indeed, to force Dionysian concepts into this category risks a real misunderstanding of the continuing philosophical weight and importance of these texts.

In considering the changing role of the Dionysian texts I have elaborated two significant features of this development of Dionysian apophaticism that have led to its modern characterisation as lacking direct relevance to public life. The first feature is the counterposing of love to knowledge in the affective turn, which opened the way to anti-intellectual readings of the Dionysian apophatic tradition. The consequences of this anti intellectual reading of the Dionysian texts are still with us today in the prevalent modern characterisation of faith as 'irrational' or non-rational. The second feature is the apparent justification offered by Dionysian apophaticism

⁹⁴ See Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200* (London: SPCK/Harper, 1972).

⁹⁵ See Morris, *Discovery*. For his discussion on developments in *The Mystical Theology*, see pp. 152-57.

⁹⁶ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 63.

⁹⁷ I shall be deconstructing the modern use of the term 'mysticism' in the next part of this chapter.

for a quietist ‘inner’ spirituality, drawn from an erroneous reading of the texts as focusing on individual mystical ‘experiences’. I shall now consider further the changes in the history of Christian spirituality that followed from the affective turn and the move to inner devotion, and their influence on how we read the Dionysian texts today.

2. Reading the Dionysian Texts Today

As we have seen, following their translation into Latin from the Greek by Erigena in the eighth century, and their subsequent dissemination in monastic communities from the tenth century onwards, the texts of Pseudo Dionysius became touchstone writings for mediaeval theology. But in our present day, Dionysian apophaticism sits uneasily within a particularly modern epistemological categorisation of ‘mysticism’, far removed from the mainstream concerns of academic philosophy. The ideas of classical Greece are at the origins of European and Anglo- American traditions of academic philosophy and also form the conceptual framework for the development of many of the key concepts of the Christian mystical tradition, but despite this historical genealogical connection, philosophy and mysticism are now perceived to be very different forms of knowledge, one rational and one ‘non-rational’.⁹⁸

It is not possible to cover all the features of this shift in the history of ideas in this thesis, but in the sections below I will focus on two significant factors that led to the separation of mysticism from its shared rationalist heritage with philosophy. The first is the development of an ‘instrumentalist’ model of spirituality in the modern era following the split between theology and spirituality. The second is the development of what Denys Turner has described as ‘spiritual positivism’, an approach which arises from the modern emphasis on feeling rather than thinking in modern spirituality, which in turn leads to an overemphasis on the experiential in mysticism. I shall then examine an alternative model of mystical consciousness

⁹⁸ Pierre Hadot has analysed the identification of Christianity with ‘true philosophy’ that can be traced back to Justin and the Apologists, Origen, and subsequently those in the Origenist tradition, including the Cappadocian fathers and John Chrysostom. See the chapters on ‘Ancient Spiritual Exercises’, ‘Christian Philosophy’ and ‘Philosophy as a way of life’, in Hadot, *Philosophy*.

proposed by Bernard McGinn, that follows the principles of classical apophaticism in its eschewing of mystical ‘experience’.

2.a Dionysian apophaticism and the development of an instrumentalist spirituality

Kees Waaijman has summarised the approach of modern instrumentalist understandings of spirituality as an attempt to ‘eliminate mysticism – *precisely to the degree that mysticism lays bare man’s inner powerlessness*’. Modernity, he says, views mysticism as an unproductive element that it often falsely labels as ‘quietist, irrational and occult’. In reaction to its ‘elimination’ by modernity, Waaijman says, ‘mysticism – a living indictment against every form of self-interest, self-will, and technicalism – developed a language and a logic of its own which in turn rendered it unintelligible to cultural rationality.’⁹⁹ Michel de Certeau agrees with Waaijman that, in response to its attempted ‘elimination’, mysticism developed its own unintelligible psychological and social constructions. Following the ‘emptying out’ of spiritual content from philosophy with the development of Scholasticism, and the associated decline of ‘philosophy as a way of life’, spirituality became separated from the growing academic discipline of theology.¹⁰⁰ An instrumentalist approach within Christian spirituality then grew apace, especially from the 17th century onwards. We see during this time the development of ascetical theologies such as that of the Jesuit tradition, and the shift in the goal of Christian spirituality from contemplation to holiness/perfection. The spiritual life became ‘instrumental, rational, goal-orientated and active’ – in short, a means to an end of self-sanctification. Though mediaeval traditions had assumed (and the theologians of the 14th century explicitly maintained) that the mystical was an exoteric dynamic within the *ordinary*, mysticism in the modern era increasingly became associated with ‘extraordinary’ spiritual phenomena.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Waaijman, ‘Phenomenological Definition’, 35 (my emphasis).

¹⁰⁰ Whilst the idea of ‘philosophy as a way of life’ was prolonged in the monastic traditions, from the development of Scholasticism onward theology had used philosophy as its ‘servant’ (see Hadot, *Philosophy*). Denys Turner offers three reasons for his identification of the late mediaeval period as significant for the pulling apart of theology and ‘spirituality’: 1. there are no theologians who are also mystics after late mediaeval voluntarism; 2. Neoplatonic dialectics of negativity are lost at about same time; 3. experientialism (the affective turn). Turner, *Darkness*, 7.

¹⁰¹ See Turner, *Darkness*, 268.

In the Dionysian texts however it is made clear that work of self-sanctification then comes from the ‘kindly Rays of God’, not ourselves. Though there is encouragement ‘to offer worship to that which lies hidden beyond thought and beyond being’ with ‘our minds made prudent and holy’, the emphasis is on participation through contemplation with the Source of all rather than our own effort.¹⁰² For

The generous Source of all holy enlightenment [...] Source of perfection for those being made perfect, source of divinity for those being deified, principle of simplicity for those turning towards simplicity, point of unity for those made one; transcendently beyond what is, it is the Source of every source [...] the Source and Cause of all life and all being, for out of its goodness it commands all things to be and it keeps them going.¹⁰³

We should, says the author of *The Divine Names*, accept the ‘foolish’ Wisdom of God, and ‘be taken wholly out of ourselves and become wholly of God, since it is better to belong to God than to ourselves. Only when we are with God will the divine gifts be poured out on us’.¹⁰⁴

But as de Certeau has pointed out the emerging development of a ‘mystical science’ of psychic or somatic phenomena led to the ‘colonising’ by theology of early psychological ideas, whereas the practical (and radical) questions of mysticism as a spiritual practice were taken up, or forgotten, by philosophy. The use of the term ‘mysticism’ is itself, de Certeau says, an indication of how the public conception of God became ‘opacified, objectified, and detached’ to be located in the inner self.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² *The Divine Names*, 68: ‘Imagine a great shining chain hanging downward from the heights of heaven to the world below. We grab hold of it with one hand and then another, and we seem to be pulling it down towards us. Actually it is already there on the heights and down below and instead of pulling it to us we are being lifted upwards to that brilliance above, to the dazzling light of those beams.’ Another metaphor used is that of hauling ourselves in a boat towards a rock – it appears we are dragging the rock towards us but rather we are being dragged towards the rock.

¹⁰³ *The Divine Names*, 51.

¹⁰⁴ *The Divine Names*, 106.

¹⁰⁵ See de Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, especially pp. 90-93, and also 23. De Certeau asserts that after the Renaissance there was a separation of individual spiritual practices from the public life of the Church, a differentiation which was associated with the distinction between ‘inside purity’ and ‘outside corruption’, and led to the creation of a psychological space for the extraordinary and the

In *The Mystic Fable*, de Certeau memorably points out that the social consequence of this construction is to place the wisdom that is hidden, secret, the ‘not that’, with those who are excluded.¹⁰⁶ In this study of the origins of modern mysticism in the 16th and 17th centuries, de Certeau shows that the categorisation of ‘the mystic’, *la mystique*, is a definition that did not appear before the threshold of the modern era, after the Dionysian texts were written. De Certeau sees mysticism as a new epistemological form, created when mystic texts are distinguished from other texts.¹⁰⁷ Indeed as Jeremy Ahearne has explained, de Certeau argued that the distinguishing of the mystical texts from others was itself a ‘function of a recent historical genealogy, produced by the splintering of human knowledge into diverse “human sciences”, and ensuing “crisis” of philosophy and the need to find a common ground [...] beneath the putatively “superficial” fragmentation of history and knowledge’.¹⁰⁸ It was de Certeau’s examination of the mystic texts themselves that convinced him that mysticism could not be understood as an ahistorical phenomena.

Similarly, Paul Rorem points out that the traditional translation of *mustikos* as ‘mystical’ can be misleading if we fail to explain the pre-mediaeval usage of the term. The word ‘mystical’ in the time of Dionysius did not mean ‘the supra-rational or emotional ecstasy of extraordinary and solitary individuals. It carries the simpler, less technical sense of something mysterious, something hidden to others but revealed to those initiated into the mysteries.’¹⁰⁹ We can see, then, that the modern use of the word ‘mystical’ can mislead us in our consideration of the texts of Dionysius as mystical writings. Neither the individualism nor the ‘supra-rational or emotional’ that Rorem identifies as features of a modern understanding of mysticism necessarily follow from Dionysian ideas, and in many circumstances they are in

supernatural. Saintliness, then, became associated with ‘inner’ and ‘spiritual’ things. See also pp 188-90 where, discussing Teresa of Avila, de Certeau argues that divine speech had by the 16th century become a language of the inner places of the soul – in other words, inner speech had replaced the public speech of God.

¹⁰⁶ De Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 34: examples of ‘the excluded one’ included the village ‘idiot’ [*sic*].

¹⁰⁷ De Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 10. De Certeau says that on the threshold of the modern era we see ‘the isolation of the “mystic” unit in the system of differentiation of the discourses that articulates a new area of knowledge.’

¹⁰⁸ Jeremy Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and its Other* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 101.

¹⁰⁹ Rorem, *Commentary*, 184. This explains why the alternative translation for the title of *The Mystical Theology* in Middle English was *Denis’ Hidden Divinity*.

contradiction to the main elements of the tradition. In short, the characterisation of mysticism in our modern understanding, which stresses its subjectivist, irrational and quietist nature, is at odds with a correct reading of Dionysian apophaticism.

Mark McIntosh too has described how in the early modern period the concept of ‘mystical theology’ developed away from the Dionysian concepts. Instead of mystical theology continuing the Dionysian tradition’s conception of itself as a transforming ‘knowledge’ of an unknowable God, it became a baroque *technology* of the self, a ‘sub-specialisation of moral theology’, where participation in the mystery of Christ seemed purely a matter of the private and particular.¹¹⁰ In this thesis I maintain that far from being such a sub-specialisation within a moral theology of personal life, the spirituality of the Dionysian apophatic tradition can play an important role in a reorientation of Christian ethics and political theology through an engagement with modern rationalist thought and egalitarian political theory. This reorientation, however, would involve cutting through modern spirituality’s perceived interior and technological focus and turning its gaze back to the ordinary and the ‘external’, and would therefore have to include a reintegration of ‘irrational mysticism’ and reason. This would represent a challenge to the ‘elimination’ of mysticism (as identified by Waaijman),¹¹¹ and would therefore have consequences for the understanding of our conception of ‘secular’ reason. Secular rationality would have to confront what Louis Dupré has described as an amnesia about the intellectual stream of Christian theology and the spirituality from which it developed.¹¹²

To summarise, the wider understanding of the ‘mystical’ that we find in the tradition of Dionysian apophaticism has been marginalised in the development of modern instrumentalist conceptions of reason. But it is also the case that the application of rational analysis to matters of ‘spirituality’ has been marginalised in the development of a modern concept of mysticism. To encourage a reintegration of the philosophical with the spiritual it is not enough to ‘rediscover’ the balance between theory and practice in philosophy and theology through a remembering of the mysticism of the

¹¹⁰ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 63.

¹¹¹ See the quotation at the beginning of this section.

¹¹² See Louis Dupré’s essay ‘The Truth in Religion and the Truth of Religion’, in Dupré, *Religious Mystery*. Dupré points out (p. 28) that philosophical models of truth predate science in the modern age and were in fact developed on ‘religious soil’, hence their use in demarcating ‘scientific’ from ‘religious’ truth is particularly inappropriate.

past. It is also necessary to face up to the current disengagement from, and indeed hostility to, objective ‘rationality’ in many modern spiritual traditions and an unnecessary counterposing of this rationality to subjective ‘experience’. It is this that Denys Turner has described as ‘spiritual positivism’, and it will be the subject of the section below.

2.b Dionysian apophaticism, experientialism and ‘spiritual positivism’

One feature of the instrumentalism of mysticism in the modern era that we have outlined above is a focus on mystical *experiences*. But as we shall see below, the very concept of ‘mystical experience’ is questionable.¹¹³ In *The Darkness of God*, Turner’s assessment of negativity in mediaeval mysticism, he warns against the consequences of mistaken experiential readings of the Dionysian texts because of the ‘turn to experience’ in modern religion. This experientialism goes with the grain of modern understandings but is something to be wary of, not because there is no place for positive expressions of religious belief, but because to identify them as the hallmark of spirituality in the Dionysian tradition ignores the true significance of the apophatic. Rather than accepting that the apophatic is actually an ‘experiential vacuum’, modern spiritualities often give psychological explanations based on experiences *of the negative*.¹¹⁴ The ‘spiritual positivism’ that Turner criticises would override this important aspect of a genuinely negative way – the classic understanding of John of the Cross of a ‘land with no ways’, and of Eckhart where we pray to God to be free of ‘God’.

In his reading of the experiential bias of modern spiritualities as ‘spiritual positivism’, Turner articulates two central concerns: firstly, the absence of a dialectical understanding of the epistemological categories of the Dionysian tradition, and hence the lack of acknowledgement of the central place of reason in apophaticism and secondly, the fact that experiential readings seriously limit the relevance of apophaticism to theology and to ‘ordinary’ Christian life.

¹¹³ See 2.c below.

¹¹⁴ Turner, *Darkness*, 259.

With regard to his first concern, Turner maintains that there are ‘undoubted continuities’ which unite the *Mystical Theology* with modern-day spiritualities, notably that ‘those metaphors of interiority and ascent, of light and darkness are indeed the common possession of a Denys, a Thérèse of Lisieux and of a contemporary pious Christian.’ But without the application of the insights of a properly understood, thoroughly rational, dialectical apophaticism to these metaphors, Turner asserts, ‘the same repertoire of images [is] evacuated of that dialectic and its corresponding hierarchies and instead, filled with the stuff of supposititious “experience”’.¹¹⁵ The affective turn of Christian mysticism has led to a revisionist positivist appropriation of the Dionysian texts.¹¹⁶ These appropriations have been interpreted as a more ‘Christianised’ (as opposed to Neoplatonic) or Western (as opposed to Eastern) progression from the limited framework of sixth-century Syrian monasticism. But Andrew Louth believes that the significance of the Latinisation of the Dionysian tradition lay elsewhere, arguing that the significant change that resulted from the adoption of the Dionysian texts by Latin Christianity was not a bias toward the experiential but rather a turn toward an *individualised* faith practice.¹¹⁷

Turner also rejects the ‘Latinising’ of Dionysian apophaticism as the explanation for subsequent experiential interpretations within the Western tradition, for

[what] the Latin tradition took from Dionysius was his epistemology and his ontology whole and entire and with them his conviction that the negative moment of the theological enterprise was intrinsically and ‘dialectically’ bound up with its affirmative moment, in a rhythm of affirmation, negation and the negation of the negation. [...] The rhythm, for the Latinising Dionysians,

¹¹⁵ See the discussion in Turner, *Darkness*, 265-68. Such supposititious ‘experience’ would for him include those ‘negative experiences’ of a ‘psychologistic mysticism’.

¹¹⁶ See my discussion in section 1.d above. This theme is also addressed in both Leclercq, Vandenbrouche and Bouyer, *Spirituality* (see especially chapter 1 of Part 2, on the ‘schoolmen’ of the 12th century, and Raitt, *Christian Spirituality* (especially chapter 6, ‘Schools of Late Medieval Mysticism’, by Alois Maria Haas, and chapter 8 on ‘The English Mystics’, by Bernard McGinn).

¹¹⁷ In *Denys the Areopagite* Louth suggests that discourse based in communal liturgical practices in the East was exported to the Latin West as individualised faith practices – the reading of scripture, theology, prayer, ascetical practice – as well as to the Western liturgy. See also Louis Bouyer ‘Mysticism’. Bouyer maintains that the specifically Christian nature of the tradition of scriptural interpretation, ecclesiastical experience of the liturgy and its focus on the Eucharist offers proof that the Dionysian apophatic tradition is not in essence an import from Neoplatonism. See my discussion of Bouyer’s views in section 1.c above, and note 56.

was, if not as in Denys principally liturgical, nonetheless fully replicated within the ordinariness of the individual Christian life.¹¹⁸

This brings us to Turner's second and associated concern, namely that experiential readings miss the point that Dionysian apophaticism is about all of our ordinary Christian lives. He is concerned that experiential interpretations of the Dionysian texts undermine the true broader epistemic strategy of classical apophaticism. He sees the Dionysian tradition as a critique of desire, with apophaticism emphasising the role of detachment and interiority as key 'shapers' of experience.¹¹⁹ For the predominant theme in the Dionysian apophatic tradition is the application of detachment and the negative dialectics it implies to wider religious observances, i.e. to the life of believers and to the Christian community as a whole. Turner summarises the understanding of the 'mystical' in classical mediaeval apophaticism as 'an exoteric dynamic *within* the ordinary, as being the negative dialectics of the ordinary.'¹²⁰ To consider mystical 'knowing' as a particular, indeed extraordinary, aspect of human experience, then, is to misread the mysticism of the Dionysian apophatic tradition in an instrumentalist, and hence anachronistic, way. Thus Turner maintains that the apophatic is not an optional element in theology, but rather the 'mystical element' in all theology.

To summarise, I have discussed above the development of an instrumentalist approach to spirituality, a 'scientific mysticism', that meant mystical practices became detached from theological or institutional Church context. Their aim became a 'consciousness, acquired or received, of a gratified passivity where the self is lost in God'. Such practices 'became far removed from the idea of a "wisdom" which 'recognises *mystery already lived and proclaimed in common beliefs*'. Though such 'wisdom' is rarely called mystical today, Michel de Certeau has suggested that it

¹¹⁸ Turner, *Darkness*, 268-69.

¹¹⁹ Turner says of Meister Eckhart's conception of detachment, '[detachment] and interiority stand not as alternative experiences, worse still as "higher" experiences, worst of all as "religious" experiences, but as form to content, as shapers to experience shaped. As categories, detachment and interiority are, for Eckhart, experientially empty' Turner, *Darkness*, 179. When we come to discuss Eckhart's concept of detachment in more detail in chapter 6 below we will see that detachment, though a process of abstraction, is not abstract in relation to lived experience, and is instead a matter of the *transformation* of experience.

¹²⁰ Turner, *Darkness*, 268

may be very close to a traditional understanding of apophaticism.¹²¹ This wisdom, based on what is common to Christians, appears to be what Turner means when he says that Dionysian apophaticism is the negative dialectics of the ordinary.

2.c Dionysian apophaticism and ‘mystical consciousness’?

Bernard McGinn agrees with Turner and McIntosh that experiential bias in modern readings of the Dionysian tradition is misleading. However, he argues for a ‘more complex attitude’ towards the role of experience, or at least towards the role of consciousness in relation to God, than Turner allows in his understanding of the intellectual stream of Dionysian apophaticism.¹²² McGinn’s analysis supplements the observations of de Certeau that the concept of ‘mysticism’ is a product of early modern times. McGinn points out that the phrase ‘mystical experience’ has only been used since the 19th century. So readings of mystical theology as based on mystical experience have to be seen as doubly historically dubious. Indeed, McGinn asserts that in the Dionysian apophatic tradition there is no such a thing as mystical *experience* as we understand it today at all.¹²³

For McGinn (as for Turner), the very category ‘mystical experience’ is problematic. This view is shared by Michael Sells, who explains that ‘if the non-intentionality claims of apophatic mystics are taken seriously, and if experience is, by definition, intentional, it necessarily follows that mystical union is not an experience.’¹²⁴ Terence Penelhum also finds the idea of ‘mystical experience’ incoherent, and holds that mystical experience is not ‘experiencing-as’: ‘mystical experience’, he

¹²¹ Michel de Certeau, ‘Mystique’, in *Encyclopaedia Universalis* vol. 11 (Paris: Encyclopaedia Universalis, 1968), 522, quoted by McGinn in *Foundations*, 311-12 (see note 126): my emphasis. It is de Certeau’s contention that the instrumentalist model of ‘scientific mysticism’ developed during the Enlightenment actually repressed ‘religious’ belief.

¹²² See McGinn’s review of Turner’s *Darkness of God* in *The Journal of Religion* 77: 2 (1997), 309-11. McGinn asserts that Dionysius, Bonaventure, Eckhart, the author of *The Cloud*, Denys the Carthusian and John of the Cross (all the mediaeval thinkers Turner engages with in *Darkness of God*) all themselves have something to say about experience.

¹²³ See McGinn, ‘Mystical Consciousness’.

¹²⁴ Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994), 214.

maintains, ‘may indeed be experience of the transcendent but not (necessarily not) as phenomena.’¹²⁵

The concerns McGinn raises about the term ‘mystical experience’ as applied to the Dionysian apophatic tradition are similar to Turner’s critique of spiritual positivism, but McGinn does propose an alternative model of ‘mystical consciousness’ – one experientially empty, but world-affirming, with an emphasis on transcendent awareness within the sensations of ordinary life. McGinn suggests ‘meta-consciousness’, or a ‘consciousness-beyond’, as better descriptions of the negative way of Dionysian apophaticism than any experiential term. His first concern about the use of the term ‘mystical experience’ is that it exaggerates the role of the affective dimension of direct contact with God in spirituality, and consequently plays down the intellectual aspect. This downplaying restricts the mystical element in religion to ‘the first level of consciousness which is the reception of the gift of God’s presence in feeling, or basic inner experience’.¹²⁶

McGinn’s second concern, which echoes that of Turner, is that an experiential reading of the Dionysian texts misses the wider epistemic strategy of Dionysian apophaticism as concerned with the ordinary experiences of Christian living. He is critical of contemporary readings of mysticism that use inappropriate modern epistemological categories to explain ‘mystical experience’ as a *special* form of feeling or perception rather than the mystical element within Christian spiritual practices and their goal. He reminds us that mystics such as Eckhart, Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Avila ‘taught that it is possible to attain awareness of the immediate presence of God even in the midst of ordinary acts of internal and external sensation.’¹²⁷

In proposing that we use the phrase ‘mystical consciousness’ in a consciously anti-experiential way, McGinn is building on the thought of the Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan. McGinn suggests an understanding of mystical consciousness as

¹²⁵ Terence Penelhum ‘Unity and Diversity in the Interpretation of Mysticism’ in Woods, *Understanding Mysticism*, 438-48.

¹²⁶ McGinn, *Foundations*, xvii.

¹²⁷ McGinn, ‘Mystical Consciousness’.

something we can attain within the ordinary processes of perception and action. The consciousness of the goal of spiritual practices, he suggests, adds a third element to the consciousness of intended objects of our actions and the self-consciousness of the agent, that of a consciousness-beyond.¹²⁸ This consciousness-beyond can be described as meta-consciousness. McGinn elaborates:

[meta]-consciousness is the co-presence of God in our inner acts, not as an object to be understood or grasped, but as a transforming Other who is, as Augustine put it, more intimate to us than we are to ourselves'. In other words in mystical consciousness God is present not as an object, but as a goal that that is both transcendent and yet immanent. He (She) is active in the human agent as the source, or co-author, of our acts of experiencing [...] knowing and loving.¹²⁹

On the basis of this reading, McGinn has defined mysticism in the Dionysian apophatic tradition as the 'inner and hidden realization of spirituality through a transforming consciousness of God's immediate presence'.¹³⁰ This definition implies a focus on introspection and self-consciousness, but eschews a reliance on inner feeling. It also implies a personal appropriation within a collective context, rather than the extraordinary experience of an individual alone. Mysticism, for McGinn, is an element within a given religious tradition. Mystics should be seen as practitioners of Christianity shaped by the experiences all other Christians have of scripture and worship.¹³¹

Summary

In the sections above I have briefly outlined certain interactions between the history of Dionysian tradition and the shifting boundaries of faith and reason in the history

¹²⁸ McGinn, 'Mystical Consciousness'.

¹²⁹ McGinn, 'Mystical Consciousness'.

¹³⁰ 'that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God' (McGinn *Foundations*, xvii). The use of 'consciousness' rather than experience to describe the mystical element in Christianity was criticised by Turner in *Darkness of God* as just another experiential notion, even if it is a consciousness of the absence rather than the presence of God. See Turner, *Darkness*, 262-65 (where he also makes reference to the views of Simone Weil).

¹³¹ See Mark McIntosh's comments on McGinn's views in *Mystical Theology*, 31.

of ideas that have led to an instrumentalisation of, and an increasing experiential focus to, Christian spirituality. In my examination of Thomas Nagel's rationalist philosophy later in this thesis I shall point to a continuation of key elements of the intellectual stream of Dionysian apophaticism, particularly in his understanding of detachment and universalism.

McGinn's 'modest proposal', discussed above, represents one attempt to integrate mysticism into contemporary theology, and to continue the insights of the Dionysian tradition in a modern philosophical context. In my analysis of the conceptual framework of Neoplatonic philosophy underlying Dionysian apophaticism in chapter 2, I will map a wider philosophical context to my discussion in this chapter of the historical relationship between understandings of faith and reason in the Dionysian tradition.

My intention in focusing on the misreading and misappropriation of Dionysian apophaticism, on the instrumentalisation of spirituality and the emergence of a spiritual positivism and experientialism, in this chapter has been to clear the ground for a proper dialogue between the Dionysian tradition and 'secular' rationality on matters of ethics and politics, a dialogue which I suggest should acknowledge the joint origins of mysticism and philosophy. To establish the possibility of a *reintegration* of some elements of mysticism in the intellectual stream of the Dionysian apophatic tradition and contemporary philosophy is key to the aim of this thesis. For it is necessary to establish that there is compatibility between Dionysian apophaticism and the (rightful) authority of reason in order to show, as I will outline in my concluding chapter, how a kenotic model of egalitarianism can serve as a legitimate and thoroughly rational basis for a Christian outlook on ethics and politics. So before I go on in chapters 3, 4 and 5 of this thesis to compare the rationalist epistemology, ethics and political theory of Thomas Nagel with those of the Dionysian apophatic tradition, and establish some key similarities, I shall focus on the origins of the central principles of Dionysian apophaticism in the philosophy of Neoplatonism.

Chapter 2

The Plotinian Origins of the Dionysian Dialectic

The Dionysian texts that, as we have seen, had such an effect on subsequent philosophers and theologians owe their conceptual framework to Neoplatonic philosophy.¹ In this chapter I hope to show how concepts from Neoplatonic philosophy, specifically that of Plotinus, set the parameters for Dionysian epistemology. For it is the model of ‘procession’ and ‘return’ that leads to the Dionysian *telos* of reason expounded in *The Divine Names*, and it is this dialectical nature of the relationship between being and non-being in Plotinus that is mirrored in the Dionysian understanding of the apophatic and cataphatic, and in the negation of the negation.² In addition, it is the Plotinian principles of total transcendence and absolute immanence, and the necessary relationship between these, that form the boundaries of the radical a-theism of the *Mystical Theology*.

In this chapter I will show that reading Dionysius in this correct Plotinian context will avoid a mistaken interpretation of the Dionysian texts as justifying a spirituality that rejects the world of human reason and human action. I shall be focussing on the teleological and ontological assumptions of Plotinus as the pre-eminent Neoplatonic philosopher, though I shall also make reference to other Neoplatonic thinkers.

At the beginning of this chapter I shall concentrate on two important aspects of Plotinian teleology that are significant for a reading of the epistemology of the Dionysian texts. The first is what I consider to be a ‘negative naturalism’ implicit in

¹ For a description of the contribution of Plotinus to Christian theology in general, see John Rist’s article ‘Plotinus and Christian Philosophy’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996) 386-409.

² It is clear that though this concept had its origin in Plotinian thought it is only fully developed (through Proclus) in Dionysian thought (see my discussion in chapter 1 part 3 above). Deirdre Carabine asserts that ‘negative theology in Plotinus is not the fully thematised concept that is found in *The Mystical Theology* of the Pseudo Dionysius, but all the basic elements found in the Areopagite’s short work are already present in the *Enneads*. Perhaps the only concept that became important in the negative theology of the later Neoplatonists, but is not fully explicit in the *Enneads*, is the *negatio negationis*.’ Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: From Plato to Eriugena* (Louvain, W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 152. And, as Bernard McGinn explains, ‘though there are texts in Plotinus that implicitly affirm the negation of the negation (*Enneads* 6.8.9), Proclus is the first Western thinker to give negation of negation a central role in his metaphysics.’ McGinn, *Foundations* 59.

the Plotinian teleology of non-being which is based on the model of the procession and return of the *One*. I shall discuss the resulting ‘mystical realism’ of Plotinian thought and show how it is the primacy of the negative that is at the core of Plotinian ontology, rather than rejection of the empirical world.

To illustrate this I shall outline how Plotinian epistemology relies on a negative perceptual strategy to reach the *One*. I shall then concentrate on the Plotinian doctrine of the ‘double status’³ of the transcendence and omnipresence of the *One* to show how the manifestation of the *One* in the empirical world is necessarily connected to the nature of the *One* as non-being. I will conclude the discussion on Plotinian teleology by concentrating on the *telos* of the intellect that arises from the place of *Nous* in Plotinian philosophy. Within the intellectual stream of Dionysian apophaticism this Plotinian understanding of *Nous* was carried forward and developed into a claim about the nature and structure of human reason.⁴

1. Plotinus the Mystical Realist

1.a The teleology of non-being

The Plotinian *One* has a world-affirming nature as the source of all things⁵ and, although it has a negative *telos*, it is the origin of all natural and human life.⁶ It is this naturalist aspect of Plotinian thought, which, as I shall show below, is followed through by Dionysius, that I wish to consider in this section.

In her book *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: From Plato to Eriugena*, Deirdre Carabine says ‘if *apophasis* is not understood in terms of the journey back to the *One*, negative theology can play only a subordinate role, for it would indeed postulate a cold metaphysical principle, and that alone. It is only if

³ See Cristina D’Ancona Costa, ‘Plotinus and later Platonic philosophers on the causality of the First Principle,’ in Lloyd Gerson (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, especially pp. 363-8.

⁴ See the earlier discussion on the splitting of the Dionysian tradition into the intellectual and affective streams in chapter 1.

⁵ See *Enneads* 5.2.1

⁶ See *Enneads* 6.7.17

the *One* is understood as *telos* that negative theology becomes a reality.⁷ The hallmark of negative theology, as Carabine sees it, is the necessity of negation to describe transcendence.⁸ It is in the *dynamic* that results from non-being as transcendence, i.e. through its teleology, that we can understand the nature of negative theology.⁹ The necessity of movement in the teleology of non-being is a theme to which we will return throughout this chapter.

The unknowing of Dionysian epistemology assumes a negative and dialectical ontology based on the non-being of the Plotinian *One*.¹⁰ The Plotinian *One* beyond being is the negation of all things and yet the source of all things.¹¹ The *One* is transcendent and self-sufficient, i.e. it is an absolute unity, whilst all other things are dependent,¹² the Plotinian *One* existing above the realm of being. It is from this *One* above being that all ‘being’ and ‘other’ derive.¹³ The Plotinian *One*, then, is non-being both as negation and as transcendence. It is this concept of the Plotinian *One* that is the basis of the ‘hyper essence’ in the *Divine Names*¹⁴ and the ‘super affirmation’ beyond affirmation and negation in *The Mystical Theology*.¹⁵

⁷ Carabine, *Unknown God*, 15. Carabine, along with A.H. Armstrong, perceives Plotinian thought as a negative theology of positive transcendence. As she explains, there is positive content in describing the *One* in negative terms, even though the *One* cannot be spoken of or known (see *Unknown God*, 115).

⁸ Carabine, *Unknown God*, 151.

⁹ See also Michael Sells’ *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, particularly his epilogue, where he describes the necessity of movement to explain how apophatic language works.

¹⁰ Plotinus adopted some of the significance of One as a number from the Neo-Pythagoreans, but turned it into a symbol of mystical rather than mathematical meaning. See W.R. Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus: The Gifford Lectures at St Andrews, 1917-1918* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1918) vol. 1, 85: ‘[The Pythagoreans thought that] number is the source of all things, in the same sense in which Plato’s Ideas are types and sources of all things [...] This strange metamorphosis of arithmetical symbols into creative types of objects deprived the ‘One’ of its mathematical meaning – it became a mystical symbol.’ Inge also observes that if the Greeks had had a concept of Zero this might have been the number that Plotinus would have used, fitting in as it does in the subsequent development of the mystical concept of ‘nothing’ (Inge, *Philosophy of Plotinus*, vol. 2, 107).

¹¹ *Enneads* 5.5.6.

¹² *Enneads* 5.5.6 and 11.9.3.

¹³ John Rist remarks: ‘Plotinus holds all otherness is in the others, none is in the *One*’ [...] ‘there is no otherness in the *One* itself. This is a splendid variant on Plato’s idea of not being (in the *Timaeus* and the *Republic*). Plato says that not-Being is to be explained as “otherness” [...] Plotinus uses the distinction to separate the *One* which is beyond Beings from Beings, but instead of calling the *One* “wholly other” or even “not Being beyond Being” as Porphyry does, he emphasises that it is in a sense the Beings that are not-Being – we should understand, of course, “not infinite-being” – because they are other than the *One*.’ John Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967). See the discussion on otherness and the *One* 215-224. See also *Enneads* 2.4.5.

¹⁴ See *The Divine Names*, chapter 4 in Dionysius: *The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, trans. Rolt.

¹⁵ *Mystical Theology*, Rolt translation as above chapter 5.

The motion initiated by the Plotinian *One* is a movement towards the multiplicity¹⁶ in the world through procession and a return of the *Soul*¹⁷ to the *One*. It explains both the origin of the natural world and human existence. The nature of the movement of the *One* to multiplicity is a ‘descent’, but one that is good and necessary.¹⁸ Indeed, as A.H. Armstrong¹⁹ says, it is the origin of a dynamic principle in which life, thought and being are all connected. In the act of procession, nothing is separated from that which was before it. Both procession and the circular movement of return feed into the dynamic life principle and ensure that there is connection between all levels.²⁰ The *One* is the source of an organic life principle that exists in all animate and inanimate things.²¹

The ‘cold metaphysical principle’ is not only fleshed out by this dynamic model of procession and return of the *One*, it is also brought to life by associated conceptions of *logos* and *eros*. In the Plotinian model of procession, the creative power of *logos*²² is, according to Armstrong, a principle that brings reason and meaning. Dionysius adopted the dialectical model of the procession and return of the *One* from Plotinus

¹⁶ It was Plotinus who developed the negative and dynamic relationship between the unity of the *One* and the multiplicity of things. In earlier Platonic tradition (most notably in the *Parmenides* and *The Republic*) there is a dualism of unity and multiplicity as there is between rest and movement. See *Enneads* 11. 9. 3, where the *One* is described as neither in rest nor in motion, nor indeed in place or time. In *Enneads* 5.5.6 the Plotinian *One* exists before form, before motion and rest.

¹⁷ The Neoplatonic concept of the *Soul* is the connection between the intelligible world and the sensible world, being the lowest in the hierarchy of *One*, *Nous* and *Soul* in the intelligible world and the highest in the sensible. As Inge puts it, ‘the *Soul* is the last *logos* of the spiritual world, and the first of the phenomenal world and it is thus in vital connection with both. To maintain this connection by constant movement is part of its nature.’ Inge, *Philosophy*, 203, referring to *Enneads* 4.7.7

¹⁸ A.H. Armstrong, *Introduction to Plotinus*, (London: Collier, 1962), 29.

¹⁹ Armstrong says of Plotinus: ‘An element of his thought which is of great importance [is] the emphasis on life, on the dynamic, vital character of spiritual being. Perfection for him is not merely static. It is the fullness of living and productive power. The *One* for him is Life and Power, an infinite spring of power, an unbounded life, and therefore necessarily productive.’ Armstrong, *Introduction to Plotinus*, 34.

²⁰ See Rist, *Road to Reality*, chapter 3, for an ontological explanation of the connection between all levels.

²¹ The emanation/procession of the *One* is often explain by a metaphor – heat from fire, rays from the sun. But there is a tension between the ‘self-contained’ nature of the *One* and its creative activity. Rist also explains that the word ‘made’ as used by Plotinus when describing how the *One* ‘makes’ Being can be understood literally as the process whereby the *One* leaves being ‘outside’ itself. See the discussion below, in the section on mystical realism, on matter as a true lie/necessary alienation.

²² *Logos* is defined in this Neoplatonic context as ‘[a] formative force proceeding from a higher principle which expresses and represents that principle on a lower level of being,’ according to Armstrong (*Introduction to Plotinus*, 34). *Logos*, then, is a creative power, but equally the bringer of reason and meaning.

and expressed the return of the *One* in terms of *eros*, hence originating a rich seam of Christian apophatic spirituality.²³

Bernard McGinn argues that Dionysius was the first to express the return of the *One* in terms of *eros*, and suggests that presenting divine Goodness as universal *eros* was one of the most significant transformations of Neoplatonic ideas in Dionysius, with a great importance for the development of Christian theology.²⁴ Coakley explains that Dionysius knowingly brought together *eros* and *agape*,²⁵ and discusses the significance of the ‘daring metaphysical move’ he makes in attributing ecstatic yearning ‘nor only to human lovers of God but also, prototypically, to *divine* love of creation’.²⁶ She maintains, following Louth, that Dionysius’ bringing together of *eros* and *agape*, and his attribution of *ekstasis* pre-eminently to God, is as much a Christian construction as a result of the influence of Plotinus and Proclus on the writer. Indeed, she sees this Dionysian construal of love as evidence of the convergence and intersection of Platonism and Christianity.²⁷

The movement of the Plotinian system, its dynamic vital character, is rooted in other earlier Greek classical ideas, including the Orphic cycle of birth and the geometric symbolism of the Neo-Pythagorean tradition.²⁸ Proclus, a later Neoplatonist, famously called the dynamic character of the procession and return of the *One* a ‘living dance’. His spatial and dynamic model of the living dance also has an

²³ Dionysius’s use of this concept has a rich history in the Christian apophatic tradition, perhaps most famously expressed in the writings and poetry of John of the Cross. Eugene A. Maio has defined *Eros* in this context as a ‘force moving towards the good, an upward tendency of the human soul, impelled by the dynamic between acknowledgement of need and longing. It is a dynamic between nothing and all.’ Eugene A. Maio, *St John of the Cross: The Imagery of Eros (Colección Plaza Mayor scholar)* (Playor, 1973), chapter 3. The classical Greek origin for this concept of Eros as the son of Penia – poverty/need – and Poros – initiative/energy – can be found in Plato’s *Symposium*. See also *Enneads* 3.5.

²⁴ See McGinn, *Foundations*, 167: ‘whilst Dionysius shared a dialectical view of God with his Neoplatonist predecessors, he was the first to express this dialectical understanding primarily in terms of *eros*.’ McGinn too sees it as highly significant for the development of Christian theology: ‘[Dionysius] created a theory of *eros* both cosmic and divine that was to be one of his most profound contributions to Christian theology’. McGinn, *Foundations*, 165.

²⁵ Coakley (referring to *The Divine Names* chapter 4 section 12), suggests: ‘let us not fear this title of “yearning”, nor be upset [...] for in my opinion, the sacred writers regard “yearning” *eros* and love *agape* as having one and the same meaning.’ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 313.

²⁶ See Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 314-15, referring to *The Divine Names* chapter 4 section 13, where Dionysius interprets the apostle Paul’s statement ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’ as evidence of the ecstasy of being *beside himself* for God.

²⁷ See Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 316. See also Louth, *Origins*, 70.

²⁸ See Sara Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, chapter 6 for an exposition of the tradition of mathematical symbolism used in Neoplatonic ideas.

epistemological dimension since it explains the relationship between the knower and the known.²⁹ The representational ‘gaps’ in Neoplatonic epistemological theory that necessitate movement mirror the movement that is necessarily created by procession and return.³⁰ The result of this Neoplatonic fusion of different currents in early Greek thought was the concept of an unknown God who is absolutely self-identified, but is differentiated in emanation, and returns to identity through a reversion.³¹

In the Dionysian texts the longing of the *Soul* for the *One* is translated as ‘yearning’. McGinn³² has explained that in Dionysian thought God is both the object of the yearning of all things to return to God, and the very yearning itself which participates in all levels of the individual hierarchies.³³ Carabine has shown that the Dionysian idea of yearning is a continuation of the Plotinian tradition of reaching for the *One*.³⁴ Significantly, Carabine points out that reaching for the *One* is a natural, rather than a ‘supernatural’, phenomenon, the longing and desire for the *One* ‘implanted’ in our souls being a ‘creative constitution in being which is natural’.³⁵ As Plotinus says in the *Enneads* when talking about love:

It is sound, I think, to find the primal source of love in a tendency of the Soul towards pure beauty, in a recognition, in a kinship, in an unreasoned consciousness of friendly relation. The vile and ugly is in clash, at once, with Nature and with God: nature produces by looking to the Good, for it looks towards Order – which has its being in the consistent total of the good, while

²⁹ The ‘living dance’ of Proclus is explained by Rappe as a movement that includes reversal. In the Proclean spatial model, a line is projected outward from the source of awareness but then turns back on itself. Rappe quotes Beierwaltes as saying: ‘in the circular return and procession the soul transforms itself, becomes and takes back what is lost in the dimensions of time and otherness.’ See Rappe’s discussion in *Reading Neoplatonism*, chapter 7. The quotation is from Beierwalte’s *Proklos: Grundzüge seiner Metaphysik*.

³⁰ In *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* Michael Sells, commenting on the necessity of movement in apophaticism and its relationship to language, has observed that whilst commentators on later apophatic mystics such as Eriugena, Eckhart and Ibn ‘Arabi have distanced their thought from the ‘allegedly static perfection of the Neoplatonic *One*’, seeing the apophatic as a development beyond this later Platonism, there is a more apophatic reading of the *Enneads*. This reading would, he says, focus on the infinite regress of references to the *One*. ‘Language becomes indefinite and open-ended. No closure is reached. Each saying demands a further unsaying.’ Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 15.

³¹ This is the tradition of the unknown God referred to by Paul in Acts – as discussed in chapter 1 section 1a. See McGinn, *Foundations*, 162, and my brief discussion of the dynamic between procession and return as the background for the Dionysian dialectic in part 3 of chapter 1 above.

³² McGinn *Foundations*, 167.

³³ See *Divine Names* chapter 4.

³⁴ Carabine, *Unknown God*, 129.

³⁵ Carabine, *Unknown God*, 158.

the unordered is ugly, a member of the system of evil – and besides, Nature itself, clearly, springs from the divine realm, from Good and Beauty; and when anything brings delight and the sense of kinship, its very image attracts.³⁶

So not only is the procession of all things from the *One* a creative process from which all things come into being, the return of all things to the *One* is also something natural in all beings.

I started this section by quoting Carabine's claim that negative theology is much more than a cold metaphysical principle, and I have outlined above the dynamic *telos* implicit in the Plotinian system that brings this principle to life. Like Carabine, Pierre Hadot sees the territory of the teleology of Plotinus in the 'gaps' between metaphysics and spiritual experience, human self and divine self, the everyday and the ecstatic, being present to others and being present to ourselves.³⁷ From this comes the importance – indeed the necessity – of movement in the Plotinian system. It is the dynamic relationship between the limited and unlimited, the measured and the immeasurable, the bounded and unbounded that provides the rich potential of Plotinian teleology.³⁸

So in this section we have seen that the Plotinian concept of transcendence, whilst necessitating a negation, is also the source of all being, life and thought. The teleology of non-being can, in this context, be described as a negative naturalism, a dynamic system that includes human participation. Human action is part of the Plotinian system, though not in the way we understand the individual agency of modern thought. This is something we shall consider further when we compare Nagel's theory of ethical motivation with that of Eckhart in later chapters of this thesis.

³⁶ Steven McKenna's translation, *Enneads* 3.5.1 16-19. The good is described as primary in *Enneads*.

³⁷ See Arnold Davidson's introduction to Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus, or the Simplicity of Vision*, trans. Arnold Davidson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Carabine explains that negative theology only acts when there is a 'gap'. See Carabine, *Unknown God*, 151.

³⁸ The classic attributes of the *One* are its unlimited, immeasurable and unbounded nature. See Carabine, 119: 'in the *Enneads* matter is a kind of unlimitedness, unmeasuredness and unboundedness in relation to the limiting, measuring and binding powers of the *One*, but the *One* remains above the things it limits (or brings into being) and cannot itself be understood in terms of limit or measure.'

1.b Mystical realism

In this section I will show how the Plotinian ontology of process and return underlies the Plotinian epistemology adopted by Dionysius. This leads, I will argue, to an affirmation of the world as real, despite the teleology of non-being. The context of this realism can be explained by an understanding of the important Plotinian distinction between discursive and non-discursive knowledge, which I shall discuss further in the next section on *aphaeresis* and *apophasis*.

In the Plotinian system, it is necessary for the *Soul* to turn away from the empirical world (of finite being) in order to return to the *One*. This turning away from the empirical world can be characterised as world-denying. However, as we shall see in our discussion in this section, this would be a misleading simplification. The *Soul*, as the point midway between the phenomenal and spiritual worlds, experiences the ‘homesickness’ of finite being.³⁹ The *Soul* in the world longs for what is absent; it is alienated from what is and seeks to return to the Good and real.⁴⁰ The turning away from the world of things is a strategy for seeking reality.

Intriguingly, matter in Plotinian philosophy shares some of the characteristics of the *One*, in that it is boundless, unlimited and immeasurable. Plotinus described it as absolute non-being but an absolute non-being that does not ‘exist’: ‘it will be more plausibly called a non-being [...] in the sense of veritable Not-Being, so that it is no more than the image and phantasm of Mass, a bare aspiration towards substantial existence [...] a phantasm unabiding and yet unable to withdraw – not even strong enough to withdraw, so utterly has it failed to accept strength from the Intellectual Principle, so absolutely its lack of all Being.’⁴¹ It originates out of privation, a lack.⁴² It also seems to share the “un-generated” nature of non-being.⁴³

³⁹ Inge, *Philosophy*, 202. The dual function of the *Soul* puts it at the centre, not the summit, of Plotinus’ system, the ‘wanderer’ of the metaphysical world between the spiritual and phenomenal worlds.

⁴⁰ Carabine, *Unknown God*, 126-129.

⁴¹ *Enneads* 3.6.7. But see also *Enneads* 2.4.5 where Plotinus says that those who ascribe being to matter are right in so far as matter is being in the intelligible realm.

⁴² See *Enneads* 3.6.11-14, especially 14, where Plotinus elaborates on the Poros and Plenia myth found in Plato’s *Symposium*.

⁴³ *Enneads* 1.8.14; also 3.6.13. The ‘un-generated’ nature of matter is the subject of debate amongst Plotinian scholars.

‘What appears in Matter is not Reality,’⁴⁴ says Plotinus. The material world is at the lowest level of procession, where creative power comes to a halt, and all that is *in* matter is a reflection of the Real. Indeed, the Plotinian concept of matter is what has been described as ‘hypothetically real’,⁴⁵ as a negation of non-existence, i.e it exists but it is not real. There is a similarity, then, between the Plotinian model of matter and our understanding of matter as energy in modern physics: both share the characteristic of being devoid of our common-sense concept of substance.

The low status of matter should not mislead us into thinking that it is a dispensable part of the system, however, for finite being is a necessary alienation. It is an alienation because it is as far as it is possible to be from the *One*, and yet it is necessary since it is part of the system of return. Bernard McGinn believes the Plotinian doctrine of the procession of the *One* (also known as emanation) was revised by Dionysius to complement the Christian concept of creation, and sees this revision as removing any implication in Dionysian thought that the material world is in some way inferior.⁴⁶ His view is that the tripartite model of *One*, *Nous* and *Soul* we find in the *Enneads*⁴⁷ was developed in a distinctly Christian direction by Dionysius and that Dionysius was followed in this by Albert the Great, Bonaventure and Aquinas.

However, it is not necessary, I believe, to claim that the Dionysian tradition is a Christian revision to any anti-material tendencies within Plotinus.⁴⁸ Indeed I hope to show that within the Plotinian tradition there is a complex relationship between the nature of matter and epistemology and truth that cannot be dismissed simply as anti-

⁴⁴ *Enneads* 3.6.14.

⁴⁵ Matter in Plotinus is unreal and impassive but, as E.R. Dodds explains, it could be described as ‘hypothetically real’. Dodds says that the Greek term for matter affirms simply its negative character, not its unreality. See below for discussion of the ‘lie’ of matter. E.R. Dodds, *Select Passages Illustrating Neoplatonism* (London: SPCK 1923).

⁴⁶ McGinn, *Foundations*, 168-69.

⁴⁷ See *Enneads* 6.8.16.

⁴⁸ Indeed, it would be fairer to conclude that the Christian tradition overall contains a tension between anti-materialist tendencies and incarnational theology that in many ways mirrors similar tensions in Plotinus (see McGinn’s discussion in *Foundations*). McGinn sees the Christian ambivalence toward the holiness of the cosmos as arising from the two traditions of the Greek contemplative ideal, that of desire for union with the ineffable God and desire for union with the cosmic God (McGinn, *Foundations*, 26; see also his reference to Armstrong’s essay ‘St Augustine and Christian Platonism’ in the collection of Armstrong’s *Plotinian and Christian Studies*). See further the discussion below on Ascent or *apophysis*.

material. Equally Plotinus cannot be dismissed as an anti-Realist because of his understanding of the radically negative nature of the *One*.⁴⁹ His negative ontology does not necessarily imply a world-denying idealism. Whilst a negative perceptual strategy is pursued to reach the *One*, which does seem to reject the empirical world, we should recognise that this is in the context of ‘return’. In the context of ‘procession’, sense experience is legitimate knowledge, though of a hypothetical reality. Although modern empirical principles of perception are denied, a straightforward ‘realism’ of discursive thought and the material world exists within a negative ontology.⁵⁰ This fits with the ‘organic life principle’ aspect of Plotinian negative ontology that we discussed in the section above on the teleology of non-being.⁵¹

The key to understanding the relationship between the *One* and finite being in the Plotinian model I am proposing is to focus on his concept of immanence. Plotinus presumes it is the world that is immanent in the *One* rather than the *One* being immanent in the world.⁵² Finite being is immanent in the *One*, just as the *Soul*, and ultimately the material world, is immanent in *Nous*. The *One* is not outside the world; the world of matter is contained in the world of *Soul* which in turn is contained in the world of *Nous*, which is contained in the *One*. It is because of this hierarchy of reality that, if we wish to follow Plotinian thought through, we can assert reality as non-being at the same time as asserting the reality of the world. This is how the Plotinian definition of matter can be characterised as a ‘true lie’.⁵³

The apparently contradictory assertion that the material world is true, but also a lie, is paralleled in Plotinus's epistemology in which the highest form of knowledge is

⁴⁹ Plotinus is often represented as an anti-realist. However, see Eyjol K. Emilsson, *Plotinus on Sense Perception*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), especially the section on ‘Charges of anti-realism’ (114-21). Emilsson refutes the interpretations of both *Enneads* 1.1.7 and 5.5.1 as evidence of anti-realism. He also points out that any interpretation of ‘thing in itself’ in any modern philosophical sense based on a distinction between the subjective and objective does not fit with Plotinus.

⁵⁰ See *Enneads* 3.8.11, where Plotinus discusses why the matter and form distinction is necessary for the world of the senses but inappropriate for ‘Seeing’ as opposed to seeing.

⁵¹ See section 1.a of this chapter.

⁵² Inge, *Philosophy*, 112.

⁵³ *Enneads* 3.6.7, which deals with the nature of underlying matter: ‘Its every utterance therefore is a lie; it pretends to be great and it is little, to be more and it is less; and the Existence with which it masks itself is no Existence, but a passing trick making trickery of all that seems to be present in it, phantasms within a phantasm; it is like a mirror showing things as in itself when they are really elsewhere, filled in appearance but actually empty, containing nothing, retaining everything.’

unknowing. In order for the *Soul* to return towards the *One* it must turn away from external objects. The metaphor that Plotinus uses to explain this approach is that one must awake from a state of dreaming.⁵⁴ The external objects are the dream, the self-consciousness that you are dreaming is the wakefulness that is necessary for contemplation. The lack of intentionality towards any objects is necessary to perceive the unity rather than the multiplicity of things. This activity is a negative activity, an *apatheia* or ‘refusing to see’; it is a ‘not paying attention’, whilst *energeia* (activity itself) is defined by Plotinus as ‘activity directed towards nothing’.⁵⁵

Plotinian epistemology, then, makes a distinction between knowledge that comes from the senses and knowledge that results from a deliberate ‘refusing to see’. Discursive knowledge is the province of sensory perception, non-discursive knowledge is that which brings us closer to the *One*.⁵⁶ The understanding of non-discursive thought in the Dionysian apophatic tradition developed from the concept of *aphaeresis* (abstraction/detachment), which we shall now consider in more detail.

1.c From *aphaeresis* to *apophasis*

In *Reading Neoplatonism*, Sara Rappe explains the shift from the early Neoplatonic idea of *aphairesis* (abstraction/detachment) to the fifth-century idea of *apophasis* (negation).⁵⁷ Rappe notes that, within the Neoplatonic tradition, discourse was not seen as an appropriate vehicle for truth.⁵⁸ Further, it was presumed that breaking free from discourse was an important strategy for reaching the truth. As Gerson points out, knowing the truth ‘is a state utterly unlike that of normal thinking.’⁵⁹ The distinction between discursive and non-discursive thought continued in the

⁵⁴ *Enneads* 3.6.5.

⁵⁵ *Energie* is activity in its pure form, i.e. not directed towards anything. See Rappe’s discussion in Chapter 3 of how Plotinus goes beyond the ‘enclosed’ Stoic notion of indifference to objects of awareness and *apatheia* to an open intersubjectivity. Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*.

⁵⁶ See Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, p. 27 for her explanation of Plotinus’ critique of discursive thinking.

⁵⁷ See Rappe’s discussion on the decentred knower and self-knowledge through introspection. This concept of introspection will be compared with that of Nagel in chapter 3 below. Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, chapter 4.

⁵⁸ See Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, Preface.

⁵⁹ Lloyd Gerson, in Lloyd Gerson, ed., *Cambridge Companion*, 42-43.

epistemology of Dionysius, and is the root of the difference between knowing and unknowing.⁶⁰ In *The Divine Names*, Dionysius makes clear that unknowing is an ‘understanding beyond being’: ‘since the unknowing of what is beyond being is something beyond speech or mind or being itself, one should ascribe to it an understanding beyond being.’⁶¹

Like Rappe, Michael Sells has described the move from Plotinian abstraction to the negative theology of Dionysian apophaticism.⁶² He has, however, a more apophatic reading of the *Enneads* than Rappe. He describes Plotinian abstraction, in terms of language, as a ‘discursive practice’, whose aim is to remove linguistic dualisms.⁶³ He describes the use by Plotinus of the metaphor of the withdrawal of glowing mass in the centre of a hollow sphere as typical of this strategy. ‘This is apophatic abstraction,’ he says, ‘to reach into a reference and withdraw the delimited referent, to reach into the notion of contemplating something and withdraw the “something”.’⁶⁴

Rappe has shown how traditional narratives, mathematical symbols, divine names and apophatic discourses were all part of the Neoplatonic path to non-discursive knowledge.⁶⁵ Non-discursive truth is achieved through language, use of texts and ritual, but with signs and symbols seen as superior to words. Self-presence and self-knowledge, which are the aims of Neoplatonic thought, are extra-lingual, though they are, of course, subject to linguistic description. The ‘end’ of thinking, then, is non-discursive knowledge. This does not require a denial of the world so much as a turning away to find reality and truth. This non-discursive thought is the end of discursive thinking, but as the focus of return to the *One*, the source of all, it is also the beginning of all knowing:

⁶⁰ Inge, *Plotinus*, 123.

⁶¹ *The Divine Names*, chapter 1.

⁶² See particularly the chapter ‘Awakening without awakener: Apophasis in Plotinus’ in Sells, *Mystical Languages*.

⁶³ Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 18.

⁶⁴ Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 18 and 30.

⁶⁵ See Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, Preface; see also chapter 6 for a description of Neoplatonic mathematical symbolism.

The Source of all this ('the heavens and the splendour of the stars') cannot be an Intellect, nor can it be an abundant power: it must have been before Intellect and abundance were; these are later and things of lack; abundance had to be made abundant and Intellection needed to know. These are very near to the un-needing, to that which has no need of knowing, they have abundance and intellection authentically, as being the first to possess. But there is that before them which neither needs nor possesses anything, since, needing or possessing anything else, it would not be what it is – The Good.⁶⁶

In these last two sections, then, we have seen how the ontological principles of non-being and being underlying Dionysian epistemology mirror the relationship between unknowing and knowing. I have described the thought of Plotinus as a mystical realism. Further, I have made clear the distinction that Plotinus makes between discursive and non-discursive knowledge. In the next section we shall see how in the Plotinian system not only is the reality of the world dependent on the non-being of the *One*, but there is a necessary relation between transcendence of non-being and immanence.

1.d The double status of transcendence and immanence

In the Plotinian conceptual framework all things both are and are not in the *One*.⁶⁷ The *One* is everywhere and nowhere, both present and absent, manifest and hidden:

[T]he Supreme is everywhere and nowhere [...] He is everywhere in entirety: at once, He is that everywhere and everywise: He is not in the everywhere but is the everywhere as well as the giver to the rest of things of their being in that everywhere. Holding the supreme place – or rather no holder but Himself the Supreme – all lies subject to Him; they have not brought Him to be but happen, all, to Him –or rather they stand there before Him looking upon Him, not He upon them.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *Enneads* 3.8.11.

⁶⁷ *Enneads* 5.5.2 and 5.3.12.

⁶⁸ *Enneads* 6.8.16.

The *One* is transcendent and is not related to anything. The *One* is other to things but it is not a thing therefore it has no contrary.⁶⁹ As Carabine puts it, ‘the *One* is not related to anything – all things are related to it.’⁷⁰

In her article ‘The Omnipresence of the Intelligible in the Sensible’, Cristina D’Ancona Costa explains how omnipresence characterises the *One*. She says: ‘According to Plotinus both the features of intelligible reality – the capacity to be present “within” physical reality in a non-localised manner and the capacity to be the cause of effects by being the immutable pattern of their inner rational structure characterise the first principle itself, namely, the *One*.’⁷¹ Whilst the *One* is present in all things, this does not constitute pantheism, according to D’Ancona Costa.⁷² This is because the *One* must fill all things and make them rather than ‘being’ itself all the things it makes.⁷³

The transcendence of the *One* cannot be separated from its omnipresence. If the *One* did not have no-presence (being nowhere) as well as being present (everywhere), then it would have the same nature as things.⁷⁴ All beings owe their being to the *One*, which is in all beings but not one of them.⁷⁵ The *One* is totally transcendent but also universally present.⁷⁶ Further, it is precisely this ‘double status’⁷⁷ of transcendence and immanence that is asserted by Plotinus as the reason that things derive from the *One*.⁷⁸ The transcendence of the *One*, then, is necessarily related to its creative power and presence.

D’Ancona Costa sees the Dionysian First Principle as a continuation of the Plotinian concept of the *One*. She says that despite the different theological backgrounds of

⁶⁹ See Rist, *Road to Reality*, 30, and my discussion of the teleology of non-being in section 1 above.

⁷⁰ Carabine, *Unknown God*, 116.

⁷¹ D’Ancona Costa, ‘Plotinus’, 361.

⁷² D’Ancona Costa, ‘Plotinus’, 364.

⁷³ There is some debate on this issue in Plotinian studies: see d’Ancona Costa, ‘Plotinus’, p 364. Inge also believes that to accuse Plotinus of pantheism is to miss the whole point of his metaphysical system.

⁷⁴ *Enneads* 3.9.4 3-9.

⁷⁵ *Enneads* 5.2.1.1-2. See also D’Ancona Costa, Plotinus, 362.

⁷⁶ *Enneads* 8.1.44-54.

⁷⁷ D’Ancona Costa says that the double status is formally presented as an explanation for the derivation of things from the *One*.

⁷⁸ See *Enneads* 5.2.1.1-2 and 3.8.9 44-54.

Plotinus and Dionysius, the First Principle of Dionysian philosophy acts in the same way as the Plotinian *One*. Dionysius also makes the explicit connection between transcendence and omnipresence, the double status at the heart of Plotinian thought about the world, and Dionysian texts use the same Plotinian metaphors of ‘overflowing’ and ‘remaining’ that describe the process of procession and return.⁷⁹

Bernard McGinn sees the Dionysian principle that ‘all things reveal and conceal God’ as resulting from this double status of transcendence and immanence in Plotinian thought.⁸⁰ Carabine believes that this double status results in a tension between the manifest and hidden God which she sees as a key feature of the Dionysian tradition of negative theology.⁸¹ This tension, then, is between the *One*’s own manifestation through the *One*’s presence in the universe and the *One*’s being that is beyond being. It is a tension between absence and presence, between simplicity and multiplicity, and is followed through in Dionysian epistemology as a dialectical relationship between knowing and unknowing.

The double status of transcendence and immanence prevents us from falling into an easy interpretation of Plotinian philosophy as a philosophical idealism which sees the world as dependent on our perception of it. For as we have seen above, the world is immanent in the *One*, not subject to our human perception of it. The double status of transcendence and immanence is an explanation for how we human beings and our world exist because of the *One* and yet at the same time yearn for the *One*, and how both of these human experiences are necessarily related.⁸² The transcendence of the *One* that calls us to turn away from the world is at the same time the cause of direct knowledge of the divine, available here and now. Thus direct knowledge of the divine, derived from the double status of transcendence and immanence, is something that we aim to attain, but also something we can realise by passive acceptance. In the next section, I will examine further the ‘passive’ nature of

⁷⁹ D’Ancona Costa, ‘Plotinus’, 367.

⁸⁰ See McGinn, *Foundations*, 174.

⁸¹ Carabine, *Unknown God*, 146.

⁸² Andrew Louth describes how the Plotinian model of procession and return and the dual status of transcendence and immanence speaks to our spiritual experience of the divine as beyond us and within us. As well as being the metaphysical explanation of the origin of the universe, it makes sense of subjective experiences of the connectedness of all things and, at the same time, our inner alienation, and also contradictory feelings that sensible embodiment is both a path to the divine and a distraction from it. Louth, *Denys*, 12.

apophasis, arising from the double status of transcendence and immanence, and the tension between this and the use of the metaphor of ascent in Dionysian thought.

1.e Ascent or apophasis?

To understand the apophatic path as an ‘ascent’ to transcendence can, as Phillip Sheldrake explains, be misleading.⁸³ The Dionysian apophatic way is based on the Plotinian model of the *One* as a paradoxical integration of transcendence and immanence, not a straightforward ascent.⁸⁴ Denys Turner sees a tension in attempts to reconcile Dionysius’ use of the language of ascent with the language of ‘immediacy.’⁸⁵ Carabine has also explained that in Plotinus the end of knowledge can more adequately be described as awakening to the presence of the Good.⁸⁶

McGinn sees the Dionysian adoption of the Plotinian concept of the return of the *Soul* to the *One* as having its origins in the marrying of different spiritual traditions and ideas, the Jewish and the Greek.⁸⁷ Dean Inge also explained how Plotinus inherited two ideas of the soul: firstly a fusion of the Greek concept of mind/spirit with the Jewish idea of spiritual energy/wisdom, and secondly the fall of soul from, and its return to, the heavenly home. He argue that the Plotinian concept relies on earlier ideas in the Greek tradition of the ‘escape’ of the *Soul* from the world and the ‘ascent’ of the *Soul* upwards to the divine.⁸⁸

⁸³ ‘Pseudo-Dionysius is not systematic and is therefore always in danger of being misunderstood. For example, he uses the word “ascent” for our movement back to God (or divinisation) [...] But it would be misleading to understand this as affirming that we come closer to God the higher we ascend. In fact, for Pseudo-Dionysius, every creature is immediate to God by virtue of creation. Union, therefore, does not create immediacy which did not previously exist but *realises* it’ (Sheldrake’s emphasis). Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 201.

⁸⁴ The Platonic model is closer to the idea of straightforward ascent, whereas the Plotinian model is more paradoxical. In the *Divine Names* the idea of spiral motion is used to explain both the force of ascent and dialectical tension. See the discussion of the metaphor of ascent in Dionysius in Turner, *Darkness*, 47-49.

⁸⁵ Turner believes the tensions between the Dionysian language of ascent (which cannot, he suggests, be abstracted from the notion of hierarchy) and immediacy were carried through to other Christian thinkers such as Bonaventure. Turner, *Darkness*, 48.

⁸⁶ Carabine, *Unknown God*, 139.

⁸⁷ See chapter 1 of McGinn, *Foundations*, especially p 30. McGinn identifies a positive and a negative side within the Platonic tradition of contemplation. The positive is ‘world-affirming views in which material reality and erotic relations are used as integral parts of the ascension process’, while the negative is ‘where discipline of and flight from the body as the soul’s prison gives a more pessimistic, almost dualistic tone to the ascetical programme’.

⁸⁸ ‘Plotinus inherited a double tradition about the nature of the *Soul*. Some of his predecessors had almost identified it with mind or spirit; that is to say, they make *Soul* the power of God in the world as

This tension between the positive striving of ascent and the negative turning away from the world can be seen in the philosophical difference between Platonic desire and Plotinian desire. Whilst the idea of the desire for the Good is present in Plato's thought, Pierre Hadot has pointed out an important distinction between the Platonic model of love and the Plotinian. Hadot notes that whilst Plato saw the desire for the Good as something that moves from the carnal to the pure, for Plotinus the desire for the Good is always focused on the Good.⁸⁹ Hadot sees within Plotinus a valuing of the virtue of passivity, that is of preparing yourself for the coming of the Good, something he argues is less evident in the Platonic conception of love. He also sees this valuing as evidence of the more 'feminine' character of Neoplatonism compared with Platonism.⁹⁰ It is through a negative 'turning away' that the *One* is reached, not through a positive active ascent.

In the next section we shall see how the paradoxical relation of transcendence and immanence we have discussed in this section plays out in the epistemological response of the *Soul* to the *One*. We will see that the *telos* of the intellect is the action of a power in us that is like the *One*.

1.f The *telos* of the intellect

We have seen in the first section of this chapter on the teleology of non-being how in the Plotinian dynamic between non-being and being the concept of motion is significant. The key driver of the Plotinian system of procession and return is the concept of likeness, most specifically the likeness between the *Soul* and *Nous* and *Nous* and the *One*. The ontological structure of the Plotinian spiritual world is that of a hierarchy of the *One*, *Nous* and the *Soul*. Likeness is an action of the intellect, but an action that is a response to the call of the *One*. The Soul has to make itself like the

spiritual energy like that ascribed to "Wisdom" in late Jewish literature. Others had thought not of *Soul* but of Souls, and had elaborated a semi-mythical doctrine of the fall of the Soul from its heavenly home and of its return hither.' Also 'the soul is the centre, not the summit of Plotinian philosophy. It stands midway between the phenomenal world, of which it is the principle, and the world of spirit, which is its principle.' Inge, *Philosophy*, vol. 1, 202.

⁸⁹ Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus*, 55. See also *Enneads* 5.5.12, where in contrast to the 'stirring of passion towards (Beauty)' which is a perception of 'those already in some degree knowing and awakened', the Good is seen as 'earlier, the prior' and 'the Good, as possessed long since and setting up a natural tendency, is inherently present to even those asleep.'

⁹⁰ Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus*, 56-57. Hadot sees this virtue of passivity as more 'female'.

One in order to return.⁹¹ The *Soul* responds because there is something of the higher in the lower.⁹² The *One* draws all things back to itself simply by being what it is – the source and power of all things.⁹³

Because the Plotinian spiritual existences are relational there is no distinct separation between the higher and lower levels.⁹⁴ It is this hierarchical ontological structure that underlies the epistemology of Dionysian thought. The relation of the higher level to the lower level is within the power of the higher level for, importantly, in Plotinian thought the *One* is accessible in some way. It is the nature of this accessibility that forms the ontological basis of the Plotinian, and subsequently the Dionysian epistemology. Ontologically then, the *One* is more real than *Nous*, or the *Soul*, which in turn is more real than the three levels of existence in the Intelligible world: Soul, Mind, Body.⁹⁵ Thus, there exists something of the higher level in the lower, to which the lower has access, despite the fact that the higher level is transcendent.

It is *Nous*, the intellect, that allows us the self-knowledge necessary for the return to the *One* through ‘likeness’;⁹⁶

Yet; our knowledge of everything else comes by way of our intelligence; our power is that of knowing the intelligible by means of our intelligence; but this Entity transcends all of the intellectual nature; by what direct intuition, then, can it be brought within our grasp? To this question the answer is that we can know it only in the degree of human faculty; we indicate it by virtue of what in ourselves is like it. For in us, also, there is something of that Being; nay, nothing, ripe for that participation, can be void of it.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Carabine, *Unknown God*, 126.

⁹² The key to knowledge in the Plotinian system depends upon the lower having access to the higher.

⁹³ *Enneads* 3.8.9

⁹⁴ See Rist, *Road to Reality*, chapter 3 for a longer explanation of the relationships between spiritual existences.

⁹⁵ The *Soul* exists in the two worlds of the Sensible and the Intelligible – and ‘wanders’ between the two: see note 17 above.

⁹⁶ See Rist’s discussion of union with the *One* in *Road to Reality*, especially 219-224.

⁹⁷ *Enneads* 3.8.9.

This ‘likeness’ is ‘something’ of the higher level that is in the lower level (of the *One* in *Nous*, and of *Nous* in the *Soul*) and because of this relation the *Soul* ‘surrenders’ itself to the ‘grasp’ of the *One*.⁹⁸ This ‘likeness’, then, is both a connection and a dynamic. The ‘grasp’ happens because there is a connection, a power is in us that is like the *One*. But there is a dynamic to this connection where all otherness, all finite self, is lost and the *Soul* ‘abandons’ itself.⁹⁹ This ‘likeness’ is the origin of what Eckhart subsequently described as the ‘spark in the soul’.

This access of higher to lower levels is, then, a natural function. As Plotinus puts it in *Enneads* 6.9.9, ‘We have not been cut away; we are not separate [...] because the Supreme does not give and pass but gives on forever,’ and he continues: ‘Life in the Supreme is the native activity of the Intellect.’ We must conclude, then, that even if we cannot know the *One*, the *One* is part of us. This means that we have access to something unknowable. This access has to be a form of knowledge, even if we cannot describe what it is.¹⁰⁰ For John Rist¹⁰¹ is surely right when he says that the term ‘being’ has no meaning in the Plotinian system if we do not acknowledge some way of knowing the unknowable.

The intellectual stream of the Dionysian tradition inherited this Plotinian conception of the *telos* of the intellect. This *telos* of Plotinian thought is based on the pivotal role of *Nous*, occupying as it does the position between the *Soul* and the *One* in his philosophy, *Nous* being the ‘trace’ of the *One* in us. But if what is accessible is also unknowable, this tells us something important about the nature of reason.

The fact that ultimately *Nous* has no ‘content’ is not, as Carabine has explained, a rejection of reason.¹⁰² As Carabine argues, it would be a modern (mis)-reading of

⁹⁸ ‘a grasp of the *One* by a power in us like the *One*’ (Rist, *Road to Reality*, 220).

⁹⁹ Rist, *Road to Reality*, 224.

¹⁰⁰ See *Enneads* 5.5.6: ‘one wishing to contemplate what transcends the Intellectual attains by putting away all that is of the intellect, taught by the intellect, no doubt that the Transcendent exists but never seeking to define it.’ I shall be discussing the interpretation of this un/knowing as a knowing that rather than a knowing what when I discuss the mystical work *The Epistle of Privy Counselling* in Chapter 6.

¹⁰¹ Rist, *Road to Reality*, 32-33. Rist notes that Plotinus rejected the idea that there was absolute ontic dissimilarity between the *One* and finite being. He goes on to explain that if we follow through Plotinus’ view of finite and infinite being, ‘we must say that there would [...] appear to be some kind of link between *One* and others unless our term Being is to be wholly divested of meaning.’

¹⁰² Carabine, *Unknown God*, 141.

Plotinus to interpret this negative *telos* as a denial of human reason, for ‘in the overpassing of all knowledge Plotinus does not end by denying human reason. This kind of criticism, based as it is on the post-Cartesian emphasis on rational autonomy of the intellect, cannot be levelled against the philosophy of Plotinus.’¹⁰³

As we have seen in our discussion in chapter 1, the negative theology that developed from classical apophaticism (i.e. dialectical theism) challenges certain modern conceptions of knowledge which rely on the distinction between knower and the known, a distinction based on what Rubenstein has described as the subject/object binary.¹⁰⁴ In this intellectual stream of apophaticism, unknowing is not a cessation of the intellect but actually is the *telos* of the intellect. As we have also discussed in chapter 1 when considering the effects of the affective turn, the intellectual stream of Dionysian apophaticism, unlike the affective stream, does not suggest we cease knowing and then rely on loving to reach the divine - instead we follow through the *telos* of unknowing to the place where, as Denys Turner has suggested, our reasoning is ‘at the end of its tether’.¹⁰⁵

Summary

The dialectical theism in the Dionysian *telos* of unknowing, mirroring the Plotinian teleology of non-being we have described in this chapter, illustrates the close relationship between the nature of human reason and the nature of faith in apophatic thought. In chapter 3 when I examine the epistemology of Thomas Nagel and the similarities in his thought with key elements of Neoplatonic philosophy, we shall be considering further what implications this negative *telos* of the intellect has on our

¹⁰³ Carabine, *Unknown God*, 141.

¹⁰⁴ Mary-Jane Rubenstein, ‘Unknow Thyself: Apophaticism, Destruction, and Theology after Ontotheology’, *Modern Theology* 19:3 (2003), 395.

¹⁰⁵ ‘You begin to occupy the place of the intellect when reason asks the sorts of question the answers to which you know are beyond the power of reason to comprehend. They are questions which have a double character; for they arise as questions out of our human experience of the world; but the answers, we know, must lie beyond our comprehension, and therefore beyond the experience out of which they arise. And it is in that sense that reason, at the end of its tether, becomes an *intellectus* and that just where it does, it meets with the God who is beyond its grasp.’ Turner, *Faith*, 118.

understanding of the nature of human reason and the role for human action, based on a search for objectivity, that is open-ended and potentially liberating.

To deny the teleological nature of the origins of the Dionysian tradition, whose features are motion and radical negation, is to remove it from a context that explains the significance of *Nous* and our accessibility to the divine. Interpretations that deny the teleological and dialectical nature of Dionysian thought risk marginalising the important role reason plays in the Dionysian tradition of negative theology. We will now, in the remainder of this chapter, examine such an interpretation.

2. Dialectical Theism *or* Deconstruction

In the next two sections I wish to focus on a contemporary debate about the nature of Dionysian ontology. There is disagreement between some postmodern commentators on negative theology and those who interpret Dionysian ideas in a tradition of dialectical theism. Here I wish to draw out the different interpretations of the roots of Dionysian thought that underlie this disagreement, and indicate their significance for the understanding of the role of human reason and human action in apophaticism.

2.a Derrida and the Dionysian concept of beyond being

Arguably the most prominent postmodern commentator on negative theology was Jacques Derrida. His main charge against negative theology was that, in the end, it merely inverts the universalist ontology and epistemology of theism.¹⁰⁶ Derrida's rejection of the traditional understanding of Dionysian apophaticism has to be seen in its own context, that of an anti-universalism characteristic of the continental philosophy of 1960s-80s, as found in the works of Deleuze, Lyotard and Foucault. These thinkers identified universalism not only with metaphysics, but with the whole

¹⁰⁶ As Mark C. Taylor explains, 'The via negativa traditionally turns out to be a reversal that changes nothing but merely repeats, by inverting, the ontological and epistemological principles that lie at the foundation of Western thought and culture.' Mark C. Taylor, *Notes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3.

of Westernisation, including the politics of colonialism and globalisation.¹⁰⁷

Derrida distinguished between the apophasis of negative theology and its relationship to revealed religion and his own understanding of ‘something secret’.¹⁰⁸ His view that ‘there is something secret’, which neither conceals itself ‘nor can it be unveiled’, stands in direct contrast with the central epistemological claim of the Dionysian tradition that all things both reveal and conceal God, for ‘God is known in all things and apart from all things [...] He is All Things in all things and Nothing in any, and is known from all things unto all men, and is not known from any unto any man’.¹⁰⁹ Derrida’s understanding of the ‘something secret’ concerns neither the initiation into mystery as found in the tradition of the ancient Greek mystery cults nor the learned ignorance of the practice of contemplation in the negative way of the Christian mystics,¹¹⁰ nor something esoteric, in short as he states ‘the secret is not mystical’.¹¹¹

Despite his positive engagement with the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius in works such as *How to Avoid Speaking – Denials*,¹¹² Derrida’s deconstructionist interpretation of negative theology appears to underestimate its atheism and falsely contrasts an incoherent understanding of total otherness with the radical otherness which is present in the thought of followers of the intellectual stream of Dionysian tradition such as Meister Eckhart.¹¹³ When we delve deeper into Derrida’s interpretation, we find there are two main areas of disagreement between Derrida and those who would interpret traditional negative theology in a more classical way;

¹⁰⁷ Ketī Chukhrov ‘Genesis of the Event in Deleuze – from the multiple to the general’, in Artemy Magun, ed., *Politics of the One: Concepts of the One and the Many in Contemporary Thought* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 51.

¹⁰⁸ See ‘Passions; An Oblique Offering’, especially the section ‘There is something secret’, in Derrida: *A Critical Reader*, ed. David Wood (Oxford, Blackwell, 1992), 20-22.

¹⁰⁹ *The Divine Names*, chapter 7.3. Compare this with Derrida: ‘There is something secret. But it does not conceal itself. Heterogenous to the hidden, to the obscure, to the nocturnal, to the invisible, to what can be dissimulated and indeed to what is non-manifest in general, it cannot be unveiled.’ Derrida, ‘Passions’, 21.

¹¹⁰ This is an explicit reference to the practices of spirituality in the apophatic tradition.

¹¹¹ Derrida, ‘Passions’, 21-22. The secret is ‘as mute and impassive as the *chora* and as such resists history and narrative.’

¹¹² Taylor explains that Derrida identifies two strands of negative theology in the Greek tradition – one dominant and one repressed. It is the repressed one – a non-dialectical third neither being nor non-being, negativity without negativity – which he identifies with the Platonic *chora*. I discuss this further in chapter 2. See Taylor, *Notes*, especially 47-53.

¹¹³ Turner, *Faith*, especially 155-65.

firstly, his interpretation of the nature of Dionysius' atheism, and secondly his understanding of the dialectical nature of Dionysius' thought.

We have seen above that the radical atheism of Dionysius arises from his adoption of the Plotinian idea of the double status of transcendence and immanence, that is the total transcendent 'otherness' of the *One* and hence the absolute immanence of the *One*.¹¹⁴ Both the negative transcendence of the *One* and the consequential immanence is refuted by Derrida.¹¹⁵ Derrida also refutes the dialectical nature of the Plotinian *One*, which, as we have seen above,¹¹⁶ was further developed in Dionysian thought. Instead, he posits a non-dialectical model that 'flickers' between absence and presence.¹¹⁷

A key focus of theological and philosophical debate on these different interpretations of negative theology has been the use in the Dionysian texts of the word *hyperousious* to describe the nature of beyond being. Whilst Jean-Luc Marion has interpreted *hyperousious* as a hyper-essence, Derrida has interpreted it as otherwise than/without being.¹¹⁸ Underlying these different interpretations lie different models of the relationship between 'being' and 'other' and 'non-being'. Marion emphasises that the transcendence of the *One* includes an absolute negation of being, whereas Derrida's interpretation means the non-being of the *One* is not absolute, as it is always compromised by a positive transcendence.

Kevin Hart has sided with Marion in the disputed understanding of *hyperousious*.¹¹⁹ He believes that the prefix *hyper* has a negative connotation that Derrida does not

¹¹⁴ See section 1.d of this chapter, above, and Turner's chapter 'Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason' where he asks: 'What is it the atheist denies that the negative theologian does not also deny?' Denys Turner, 'Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason', in Davies and Turner, eds, *Silence and the Word*, 11-34.

¹¹⁵ See Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking'.

¹¹⁶ See section 1a.above, on the teleology of non-being.

¹¹⁷ This flickering is described by Hent de Vries as 'a certain alternation or oscillation that goes beyond the either/or of affirmation or negation, continuation or interruption, fidelity or antinomism, reverence for icons or iconoclasm' p 30. De Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn*. De Vries explains that in *Aporias* Derrida described this as 'belonging without belonging'.

¹¹⁸ This is discussed by de Vries in *Philosophy and the Turn*, especially pp. 53-95. See also Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991) and Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking'.

¹¹⁹ Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign; Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

take on board and is, ironically, analogous to the deconstruction of metaphysics that Derrida himself supports.¹²⁰ Hart sees the negative theology of Dionysius as more than a secondary apophatic foil to a primary cataphatic theology. Rather, Hart's view of Dionysian apophaticism is that it places positive theology in the context of a radical negative theology.¹²¹

Hart and Marion's interpretation seems to follow more closely a Plotinian understanding of non-being as a beyond being that is a radical negation, truly other to being, and other to the other to being. As John Rist has pointed out, the Plotinian 'not being' that is beyond being does not contain the otherness of the *One*.¹²² The *One* is other than finite beings even though its otherness resides in the finite beings because the *One* is not related to any other things: all things relate to it and it has no contrary.¹²³ Derrida's understanding of negation, however, is a model of alternating being and other, a non-dialectical third way that is neither being nor non-being, a place beyond absence and presence that is irreducible to either.

Toby Foshay has characterised Derrida's concept of denegation as 'inverse apophatics', but this is not strictly accurate, for Derrida denies the supercessive nature of the negation of the negation of Dionysian thought and replaces it with a non-dialectical third way.¹²⁴ Mark C. Taylor has described Derrida's analysis of the non-dialectical third as a repressed 'tropic of negativity' within Platonic thought that is 'neither being or non-being'. This non-dialectical 'third' of Derrida's thought is based on the concept of the *chora*, as found in Plato's *Timaeus*, as a 'repressed' negativity. This 'third place' that Derrida insists is a desert in the desert, a place that will 'never permit itself to be sacralised, sanctified, humanized, theologised, cultivated, historicalized',¹²⁵ is a place that cannot be reached or touched, a place that

¹²⁰ Hart, *Trespass*, 202.

¹²¹ 'Negative theology plays a role within the phenomena of positive theology but it also shows that positive theology is situated with regards to the radical negative theology that precedes it.' Hart, *Trespass*, 201-02.

¹²² 'The *One* has no otherness, the others are other than the *One*.' Rist, *Road to Reality*, 37.

¹²³ Rist also makes the point that commentators on Plotinus, including Porphyry and Victorinus confused the 'indeterminant being of unqualified matter with the non-being of the *One*'. Rist, *Road to Reality*, 35-36.

¹²⁴ See Toby Foshay, 'Denegation and Resentment', in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds, *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 1-24.

¹²⁵ De Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn*. See especially de Vries' discussion on the *korah/chora*, pp. 108-115.

is neither being nor non-being. Derrida insists that the *chora* is a radically atheological and radically nonhuman place that has nothing to do with negative theology.¹²⁶ Graham Ward¹²⁷ sees the ‘unstable, mysterious, ungrounding origin’ of the *chora* that is found not only in the work of Derrida but also in Irigaray and Kristeva¹²⁸ as something irreducible, that which is repressed.¹²⁹

2.b Beyond Derrida

In light of the above, we now turn to a brief discussion of the criticisms of Derrida’s interpretation of negative theology by those who support, to a greater or lesser degree, a more dialectical negative theology based on a classical understanding of the Dionysian apophatic tradition.

Bernard McGinn has explained how Plotinus initiated a new dialectical direction in Neoplatonic thought, though one that is based on Platonic categories. Both Paul Fiddes and Denys Turner have challenged the omission, in Derrida’s understanding of Dionysian apophaticism, of some of the main characteristics of the apophaticism that arose from this new direction, such as its radical atheism and the dialectical relation of the apophatic and cataphatic ways.

McGinn has described how Dionysius applied the Neoplatonic interpretation of Parmenides, the derivation of transcendental plurality from absolute unity, to the Christian God. He did this by using the negation of the first hypothesis, the *One*, and the affirmation of the second, the procession of the *One*, as negative and positive expressions of a single creative source.¹³⁰ The *One* described by Plotinus in the

¹²⁶ Derrida ‘How to Avoid Speaking’, 167.

¹²⁷ See Graham Ward’s introduction in *Postmodern God*, xxxiii-xxxiv.

¹²⁸ See Paul Fiddes’ reading of Julia Kristeva’s idea of the *khora* in ‘A Place that is not a Place’, in Davies and Turner, *Silence*, 35-60: ‘In Kristeva’s thought the *chora* is a womb-like, nurturing place of origin, a space which contains the archetypal impressions of love and relationships which precede language and sexual experience, traces of the *chora* in consciousness can break through verbal signifiers, subverting the usual order of symbols and reaching towards something altogether “other”.’ Graham Ward sees the conceptions of the *chora* as rooted in the idea of the ‘between’ or ‘interval’ in the thinking of Heidegger.

¹²⁹ The influence of 20th-century psychoanalytic concepts, particularly those of the Lacanian school, in the development of this non-dialectical conception of *chora*, should not be underestimated.

¹³⁰ See McGinn *Foundations*, 58.

Enneads is neither at rest nor in motion, nor indeed in time or place, but this is not because of any oscillation or alternating between these two states.¹³¹ In Plotinus, then, we see a break from Platonic orthodoxy. Rather than the coexistence of the single *One* and multiplicity (and rest and motion) of earlier Platonic thought,¹³² in Plotinus both multiplicity and motion are seen as resulting from the *One*.

Like McGinn, A.H. Armstrong sees the concept of the Neoplatonic unknowable, negatively transcendent *One* as unsourced in Plato.¹³³ He too sees Plotinus's interpretation of *Parmenides* as an original philosophical development. As Carabine says, the ideas of Parmenides were given a new theological meaning such that the *One* is everywhere and nowhere, neither limited nor unlimited, and in all things and in no things.¹³⁴

But Derrida appears to reject this archaeology of the dialectic, and its significance in Dionysian thought, that McGinn, Armstrong and Carabine have described. The apophatic negation of Dionysian thought, though based on Platonic categories, uses the framework of *Plotinian* thought.¹³⁵ Derrida maintains that the apophatic understanding of negative theology justifies conventional theological and philosophical norms. But because he does not acknowledge this development of Neoplatonic thought from Platonism (and the further development by Dionysius along this trajectory), he dismisses the teleological and dialectical nature of negative theology. There is no place in the Derridean understanding of Dionysius for human participation in the *telos* of the intellect,¹³⁶ nor for direct knowledge of the divine

¹³¹ As opposed to Derrida's alternating presence and absence. See *Enneads* 5.11.9.

¹³² As in the *Parmenides*.

¹³³ 'It seems, then, impossible to find a source for the "negative theology" of the extreme transcendence and absolute unity of the Plotinian *One* in Plato or Xenocrates [...] the most distinctive characteristic of Neoplatonist theology (is) the unknowable, negatively transcendent *One*.' A.H. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1954), 21.

¹³⁴ See Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 146.

¹³⁵ In addition, Derrida's Platonic interpretation of Parmenides can be questioned. In Jussi Blackman's discussion of modern phenomenological readings of Parmenides, she points out that in the readings of classical commentators, including Nietzsche, a concentration on pure presence requires a break between practical everyday and common sense perceptions of the empirical and the absolutely universal. However other interpretations suggest that the point of Parmenides' Poem is actually that a reconsideration and reinterpretation of the empirical is necessary in the light of an absolute viewpoint. i.e. that there is a correlation between *alethea* and *doxai*. See Jussi Blackman, 'Unity in Crisis', in Magun, *Politics of the One*, especially pp. 90-97 and note 26 referring to the work of Reinhardt and Schwabl.

¹³⁶ See section 1.f, above.

through absolute immanence.¹³⁷ And, as we shall see below, if we fail to acknowledge the proper place of both human reason and action in the Dionysian system, based on Plotinian metaphysics, this limits its potential for radical ethics and politics.¹³⁸

Mary-Jane Rubenstein has discussed the epistemological implications of the dispute between Derrida and Marion on the nature of *hyperousious* in her article ‘Unknow Thyself: Apophaticism, Deconstruction, and Theology after Ontotheology.’ Rubenstein seems to suggest a middle way between the epistemological consequences of deconstructivist arguments and those of traditional negative theology in the Dionysian tradition.¹³⁹ Rubenstein sees the ‘relentless neither/nor’ of negative theology as in some ways similar to the denegation of deconstructionism. Rubenstein asserts that Dionysius makes a ‘proto-post-structuralist moment’ when he says that apophatic negations are beyond every denial and assertion. But she sees apophaticism as distinct from both the motionless confidence of ontotheology and the aimlessness of *différance*. Apophatic desire, she asserts, ‘is neither unresolved nor atheological’.¹⁴⁰

In his article ‘Place That is Not a Place,’ Paul Fiddes¹⁴¹ has also discussed the arguments of the deconstructionists against conventional negative theology, i.e. that we cannot establish full presence or full absence, hence neither transcendence nor immanence is possible. The theologians’ response to the ‘challenge’ of the *chora*, he suggests, should be to articulate hidden presence. Fiddes says that apophaticism is one model to explain the idea of the ‘hiddenness’ of God we find in the scriptures.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ See section 1.d above on the necessary connection (double status) between transcendence and immanence.

¹³⁸ I discuss the political implications of an apophatic anthropology in the last part of this thesis.

¹³⁹ Although in her 2009 paper ‘Dionysius, Derrida and the critique of Ontotheology’ she seems to suggest a more critical position for theology toward the dialogue between deconstruction and apophaticism. She warns of the ‘wistful’ hope of some contemporary theologians: ‘if only the gap between these post- and pre-modern negatives could be closed, contemporary theology seems to say wistfully, then we could be assured once and for all that the Trinity is not transcendental signified; that the God of revelation is not “the God of the philosophers” ; that the dead God was never God to begin with. And yet, the sheer proliferation of these studies indicate that neither Derrida nor Dionysius provides such assurance.’ Rubenstein, ‘Dionysius, Derrida, 197.

¹⁴⁰ Mary Jane Rubenstein, ‘Unknow Thyself’, 356.

¹⁴¹ See Fiddes, ‘A Place’.

¹⁴² Fiddes describes several models to explain hiddenness. Firstly, the apophatic idea where there is a continuity between the divine and the human; secondly, the Jewish idea of *Zimsum*, whereby God has left a space within God’s own being for created being; thirdly, Levinas’ model of Other-God whereby

He describes the apophatic model as assuming there is a place in the self that is inseparable from (but not identical with) the being of God. This inner self is experienced as emptiness/silence/desert. God is so near to us that normal subject/object distinctions do not apply. Fiddes argues that it is the accessibility of the other and the promise of presence that distinguishes this apophatic model of hidden presence from Derrida's view of alternating presence and absence.

Fiddes's suggested response to the dilemma of absence and presence does fit with the Plotinian understanding of the necessary connection between transcendence and immanence. Derrida and the deconstructionists problematise the relation between being and presence and deny it is possible to have a self-present self-knowledge without a divine ground. Speaking of the hiddenness of God, then, according to Fiddes, indicates presence rather than absence, but does not legitimise the 'subjective project' of the self. The place that is not a place, then, is seen as expressing a transcendence, a breaking open of the circle of human immanence, but a transcendence which is not absolute but an accessible Otherness.¹⁴³

Denys Turner has also rejected the Derridean alternating model of presence and absence¹⁴⁴ as bearing much relation to negative theology in the Dionysian tradition. In a more positive development of the apparent contradiction between absence and presence in negative theology, he describes an apophatic tradition that can express both absence *and* an excess of presence.¹⁴⁵ Again, this fits in with the Plotinian and Dionysian concept of the *One*. In this concept, the *One* is described as possessing an excess of being, for when Dionysius was describing the nature of the Super-essence he was not so much affirming the existence of God as asserting that God is more than those things that exist.¹⁴⁶ In *The Divine Names*, Dionysius says 'Not Being is an

we find traces of God in the face of our neighbour; and fourthly with revealed religion, where God is present but mediated through objects in the world. Fiddes believes that what negative theology has in common with these other approaches that deal with the hiddenness of God is the emphasis that 'God is not an object of desire but the one in whom we desire the Good.'

¹⁴³ Fiddes, 'A Place' 35

¹⁴⁴ See discussion of this in Coward and Foshay, 74.

¹⁴⁵ Denys Turner discusses the idea that the Eucharist represents a dialectic of presence and absence. Turner, *Faith*, 67.

¹⁴⁶ See W.J Sparrow-Simpson, 'The Influence of Dionysius in Religious History', in *Dionysius the Areopagite: The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, trans. C.E. Rolt (London: SPCK, 1940); Carabine also remarks: 'To think of the *One* as either Mind or God is to think too meanly.' Carabine, *Unknown God*, 123.

excess of Being',¹⁴⁷ and he further tells us that 'He is not an Attribute of Being, but Being is an Attribute of Him' and that 'He is not contained in Being, but Being is contained in him.'¹⁴⁸ Turner suggests the epistemological implications of this mirror the ontological. He sees the unknowability of God as a result of God's excess of actuality: 'God is not too indeterminate to be known; God is unknowable because he is too comprehensibly determinate – too actual.'¹⁴⁹

Denys Turner has concluded that Derrida's concept of otherness/difference is in the end incompatible with that of Dionysius, or indeed theologians of the Dionysian tradition. He points out that Meister Eckhart, following Dionysius, has a concept of 'otherness' which is beyond both 'otherness' and 'sameness'.¹⁵⁰ In *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* Turner explains that 'Derrida's generalised apophaticism of "otherness" as such seems to have roots in a view of the "otherness" of persons which takes to a point of absurdity their irreducible inaccessibility to my subjectivity, to my *ego*.' He continues, 'Derrida's principle, "every other is completely other" is not only a straightforward logical absurdity, it is also an ethically offensive one, for all its apparently benign origins in Levinas's less radically stated ethics of "alterity".'¹⁵¹

As we have seen in our discussion above of the Plotinian origin of Dionysian thought, the apophatic experience of transcendence developed from this tradition is that of total transcendence. This is the claim that the hyper-essence is beyond both being and that which is other to being, and as we have seen above, Derrida has been criticised for his failure to acknowledge the radical otherness of this total transcendence and hence the radical atheism of negative theology. As Carabine argues, the Plotinian concept of the Good is of an otherness 'so unlike anything in the created order that everything must be denied, everything, that is, that we think God to be. We allow him his existence, and that alone, for he does not possess

¹⁴⁷ *The Divine Names*, 89.

¹⁴⁸ *The Divine Names*, 139.

¹⁴⁹ Turner, *Faith*, 188-89.

¹⁵⁰ See his discussion in the chapter on God and Grammar, in *Faith*, esp. 162-68.

¹⁵¹ See Turner, *Faith*, 167.

anything of the things which come later and are lesser than him, and that includes being, the One simply is.’¹⁵²

Summary

By denying the role of the *telos* of the intellect, the radical negativity of this *telos*, its total transcendence and hence its absolute immanence, Derrida compromises the importance of reason for Dionysius and the heritage of the intellectual strand of Dionysian thought. The Derridian reinterpretation of negative theology makes reason expendable rather than central. Without a teleology and without a dialectical understanding of the relation between being and non-being, knowing and unknowing, the role of reason in the Plotinian, and subsequently Dionysian, tradition is diminished.

Thus notwithstanding contemporary attempts to seek a dialogue between deconstructionism and apophaticism, it appears we are talking about very different deserts. The irreducibility and inaccessibility of Derrida’s desert does not appear to fit with the ‘nothing’ and ‘empty place’ of the apophatic mystics. The atheological, and ahistorical, ‘third place’ seems very different from the unknowing we find at the end of knowledge in classical apophaticism. The negative naturalism and mystical realism implicit in the Plotinian system on which classical apophaticism is based is also in contrast to the philosophical idealism of Derrida and the ‘radically nonhuman’ concept of the *chora*. I suggest any dialogue between negative theology and Derrida is limited because of his rejection of the epistemological Dionysian dialectic between knowing and unknowing.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen how Neoplatonic ontology has at its heart a system of procession and return based on a *telos* of the intellect. This is the foundation for the Plotinian concept of non-discursive knowledge which is followed through in the intellectual stream of Dionysian apophaticism. I will be arguing in the next part of

¹⁵² Carabine, *Unknown God*, 134.

this thesis that the important role of reason in the Plotinian, and subsequently the Dionysian tradition, is a bridge to contemporary dialogue with modern rationalism, and that such a dialogue may be more fruitful than that attempted by postmodern theologians with idealist philosophies.

An anti-universalist stance is characteristic of the works of modern continental philosophy of the 1960s-1980s, which identified universalism as pro-metaphysical, but also as pro-statist, neo-colonialist and justifying neoliberal globalisation. The non-dialectical interpretations of the relationship between the One and the many in the thought of Jaques Derrida I have discussed above can also be found in works by Deleuze, Lyotard and Foucault, and contain implied criticism of these positions. There has been a turn back to the idea of the universal in such contemporary philosophers and political theorists such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and Alain Badiou, but not to a dialectical approach.¹⁵³

The debate on the dialectical or non-dialectical relationship of the One and Many, Unity and Multiplicity, Universalism and Diversity, however, has political implications. For the differences in ontology and epistemology identified in this chapter between postmodern interpretations and traditional negative theology lead to even greater divergence on the role of reason and human action, though this is something rarely discussed in contemporary analysis of this subject. As Mary-Jane Rubenstein has pointed out, ‘the peri-theological conversation between deconstruction and apophaticism has been almost entirely *linguistic*; that is to say, it has never quite entered the terrain of the ethico-political.’¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ I am using ‘dialectical’ in the Hegelian sense here, i.e. a relationship which allows the transition of opposites into each other. See the discussion of Badiou’s apparent dialectical position as actually a dualist fixation between the one/multiple, thesis/antithesis and ultimately a logical formalism in Vitaly Kosykhin’s essay ‘Suspension of the One: Badiou’s Objective Phenomenology and the Politics of the Subject’ in Magun, *Politics of the One*, 71-83. Kosykhin discusses Badiou’s non-monist position and the balance he gives to the negative and affirmative, 73. See also Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 2000) for a neo-Marxist explanation of the relationship of dialectics to ‘universal order’ of globalisation.

¹⁵⁴ Something she says ‘is striking, considering in Derrida’s later work, the political implications of deconstruction become clearer’. Rubenstein, ‘Dionysius, Derrida’, 198. Rubenstein discusses ‘hierarchy, teleology and the problem of the political’ in the last section of this article, where she considers the justice implications of the hierarchies of the Dionysian cosmic order. The political vision that emerges from the work of Dionysius, she concludes, is ‘either radically elitist or radically welcoming’. Rubenstein, ‘Dionysius, Derrida’, 207.

So in the last part of this thesis I will draw out some of the ethical and political implications of negative theology but in contrast to a quite different philosophical tradition, that of rationalism. In the next chapters I will be comparing the Dionysian *telos* of reason, which takes us further into the mystery of God, with Thomas Nagel's secular rationalist and teleological aspirations to a more comprehensive epistemological 'view from nowhere' and increasing moral objectivity in ethics. Whilst this is a comparison rarely undertaken, in contrast to the academic focus on dialogue between apophaticism and aspects of continental philosophy, we will see that there are significant similarities in the philosophical approaches of modern rationalism and apophaticism, particularly in the process of detachment, and the universalist and egalitarian ethics implied by this.

Chapter 3

Thomas Nagel's Epistemology of Objectivity

There is a popular prejudice that the subject of mystical thought can only be obliquely related to philosophy, or indeed any intellectual considerations, and hence is of limited theological relevance. Philosophical analysis of mystical thought usually concentrates on the specific nature of mystical experience, and rarely considers the rational basis of its claims.¹ However, the focus of this thesis is the examination is of the wider epistemological claim of mystical thought. As we have seen in our discussion of the relationship between faith, reason and the Dionysian dialectic in chapter 1, the intellectual stream of the Dionysian apophatic tradition does not make claims about mystical experience as such, but about the nature of human knowledge itself.² It is at this meta-level,³ I will argue, that rationalism and apophaticism can meet, and that the nature of objective knowledge becomes an area of joint concern. Dialogue at this meta-level has to include the evaluation of assumptions about the nature of human knowledge and human action that underlie the differing metaphysical and epistemological positions of idealism and realism, rationalism and empiricism.

In the next two chapters I will be examining the epistemology and ethics of Thomas Nagel. Nagel is an important voice in contemporary analytical philosophy, a realist and an exemplar of a particular kind of modern day rationalism. Nagel has identified connections between rationalist and religious world views as follows:

Rationalism has always had a more religious flavour than empiricism. Even without God, the idea of a natural sympathy between the deepest truths of nature and the deepest layers of the human mind, which can be exploited to

¹ As discussed in chapter 1. See footnote 1 and reference to articles in Katz, *Mysticism*.

² See the discussion on the nature of mystical consciousness in chapter 1, section 2.c.

³ Nagel talks of the meta-level of thought, which, though an implicit rejection of relativism, does not necessarily presume any particular metaphysical system of objective thought. Nagel, *Last Word*, 27.

allow gradual development of a truer and truer conception of reality, makes us more at home in the universe than is secularly comfortable.⁴

We will see in the discussion below that there are significant points of connection between Nagel's thought and the epistemology of the intellectual stream of Dionysian apophaticism, whose Neoplatonic metaphysical framework I have described in chapter 2. The connections that arise from their shared meta-level epistemological assumption that introspection is the starting point of human knowledge will form the framework for my discussion in this chapter. My further discussion in chapter 4 will focus on the connections that arise from the meta-level assumption of a participatory understanding of truth and the ethical principles that underlie this assumption.⁵ By analysing key aspects of Nagel's epistemology of objectivity and then comparing these with the Plotinian framework of Dionysian epistemology in this chapter, I will develop my argument that Dionysian apophaticism is not irrational, sharing as it does many similar features with secular rationalism.

In this thesis, as well as making the case that apophaticism in the Dionysian tradition is not irrational, I am arguing it is not world-denying and quietist, and hence it has a legitimate role in our social and political reasoning. I suggest that both the rational and world-affirming nature of the Dionysian apophatic tradition create important possibilities for a socially progressive use of apophatic ideas by Christians in our modern secular world. With this double focus in mind, I will continue my description of Nagel's epistemology of objectivity in chapter 4, but concentrate on his ethical thought. I shall examine there the claim he makes for a *necessary* connection between reason and human action, which follows on from his understanding of the nature of the objective self and the authority of reason which I describe below.

⁴ See Nagel's footnote to this passage, where he says 'To a lesser degree, the same might be said of the idea of human access to values that are objective or universal'. Nagel, *Last Word*, 130. The next chapter of this thesis will focus on Nagel's *telos* of the objective self that underlies his view of objective values and the possibility of a dialogue between this and the ethics that arise from the apophatic understanding of detachment.

⁵ By this I mean truth as something we participate in rather than assent to. I will explore this topic further in the next chapter.

In the first part of this chapter I shall begin by considering the meta level assumption that Nagel's rationalism shares with the apophatic mysticism – that the starting point of epistemology is introspection. I will show how this enables Nagel to develop an open epistemology that positively engages with the unknown. In the second part of this chapter I will show a line of development from the introspection of the Neoplatonic tradition, through Cartesian thought, to the modern-day rationalism of Nagel. Then by comparing certain key themes present both in apophaticism in the Dionysian tradition and rationalism, and showing where there are similarities in their epistemological approach, I hope to develop one of the central themes of my thesis – that human reason in its full critical rigour can be an area of common ground between apophatic ideas and contemporary secular thought.

1. The Starting Point of Introspection

Nagel has an understanding of the authority of objective thinking based on his assertion of both the mind's capacity for a priori theorising and our ability to have impersonal thoughts.⁶ His conception of impersonal thoughts and their role in our moral thinking will be discussed later in this thesis,⁷ but in this chapter we shall be concentrating on Nagel's epistemological rationalism and the claims he makes for objectivity as a way of increasing the scope and depth of our human understanding.

Nagel's idea of the 'view from nowhere' has been caricatured as 'disembodied and unsituated minds denying their foundation'.⁸ However, the starting point of introspection for Nagel is not a denial of our empirical nature or our subjective perspective but rather an ambition for transcendence *in full recognition of our*

⁶ See Nagel, *Last Word*, chapter 4, especially section IV, which explains his concept of the nature of impersonal thoughts, and section 5 of chapter 5 of *The View from Nowhere* for an explanation of his conception of a priori knowledge. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁷ For Nagel these impersonal thoughts are highly significant for moral judgement because they are our access to a source of an authority beyond the personal. This is a theme I will discuss in chapter 4.

⁸ Grace Jantzen, referring to Nagel, argues: 'There could thus be no truck with the "view from nowhere" of disembodied and unsituated minds denying their foundation; it is only from our gendered embodiment that the source and criteria of religious imagination can be drawn;' and also 'it is still quite common for philosophers of religion to profess that their ideal and practise is neutrality and objectivity, a "view from nowhere", uncontaminated by social attitudes or values.' Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 146 and 205. I hope to show in this chapter that Nagel's concept of objectivity is more holistic and inclusive than Jantzen's caricature suggests.

*contingent position in the world.*⁹ I hope to show that Nagel's rationalist starting point allows the possibilities of an inclusive concept of reason, which is to say that introspection has the potential to broaden, deepen and advance our understanding of the world. This theme will be a focus in this chapter.

I will consider in the sections below both the advantages and disadvantages of Nagel's starting point of introspection. I will examine how such a starting point enables Nagel to incorporate that which is unknown within his epistemology without limiting the scope and depth of reason and then locate the underlying aspiration to advance knowledge that arises from Nagel's rationalist realism within the epistemological debate in modern philosophy.

In part 2 of this chapter I shall consider certain differences and similarities between the concept of introspection in the pre-modern philosophy and the role of introspection in Nagel's contemporary rationalist and realist epistemological approach. The concept of introspection in Nagel's philosophy goes beyond the phenomenology of perception of modern empiricism, and in his understanding of the importance of the 'view from nowhere', has significant features in common with the broader concept of introspection in Neoplatonist thought, including a form of 'objectless awareness' and of self transcendence.

1.a Objectivity, subjectivity, realism and the scope of reason

Nagel believes that 'objectivity allows us to transcend our particular viewpoint and develop an expanded consciousness that takes in the world more fully.'¹⁰ The validity and limits of this objectivity form the central theme of his book *The View from Nowhere*. The very 'ambition' for such transcendence is contentious in modern

⁹ 'It is necessary to combine the recognition of our contingency, our finitude, and our containment in the world with an ambition of transcendence, however limited may be our success in achieving it.' Nagel, *View*, 9.

¹⁰ 'We can add to our knowledge of the world by accumulating information at a given level – by extensive observation from one standpoint. But we can raise our understanding to a new level only if we examine the relationship between the world and ourselves which is responsible for our prior understanding, and form a new conception that includes a more detached understanding of ourselves, of the world, and of the interaction between them. Thus objectivity allows us to transcend our particular viewpoint and develop an expanded consciousness that takes in the world more fully. All this applies to values and attitudes as well as to beliefs and theories.' Nagel, *View*, 5.

philosophy.¹¹ Nagel steers a path between two different strands of thought that would reduce such an ambition – idealism and scientism.¹² Philosophers should aim for the truth, he says, even if this limits what can be said,¹³ and significantly even if it means we have to say things with less certainty.¹⁴ He criticises those philosophers who would dismiss metaphysical problems and hence ‘threaten to impoverish the intellectual landscape’ because they experience the philosophical impulse to be ‘humiliating and unrealistic’.¹⁵ His sympathies on the question of the reach of human reason are with Descartes and Frege rather than with Hume, Kant and Putnam, and they are in direct conflict with the relativism found in the postmodern pragmatism of Rorty, a conflict we shall consider further below.¹⁶

Nagel begins his explanation of the ‘view from nowhere’ by describing a physical conception of objectivity which is both centreless and featureless, for it is without perceptual perspectives.¹⁷ He says ‘the physical world as it is supposed to be in itself contains no points of view and nothing that can appear only to a particular point of view. Whatever it contains can be apprehended by a general rational consciousness that gets its information through whichever perceptual point of view it happens to view the world from.’¹⁸ However, Nagel denies that the subjective can be explained

¹¹ Nagel has in mind the ‘significant strain of idealism in contemporary philosophy, according to which what there is and how things are cannot go beyond what we could in principle think about. This view inherits the crude appeal of logical positivism.’ Nagel, *View*, 10.

¹² ‘[If] truth is our aim we must be resigned to achieving it to a very limited extent, and without certainty. To redefine the aim so that its achievement is largely guaranteed, through various forms of reductionism, relativism, or historicism is a form of cognitive wish fulfilment. Philosophy cannot take refuge in reduced ambitions. Nagel, *View*, 10. In terms of scientism he has in mind the ‘myopic’ approach of the application of *current* paradigms of physics and evolutionary biology to explain the whole universe, which is the central argument of his most recent book *Mind and Cosmos*. Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Whilst it may not be helpful, as Paul Janz points out, for Nagel to ‘lump’ all non-objectivist viewpoints together in this criticism, Nagel’s comment that contemporary philosophy has reduced ambitions is surely pertinent. See Paul Janz, *God, the Mind’s Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 68.

¹³ ‘The right attitude in philosophy is to accept aims that we can achieve only fractionally and imperfectly, and cannot be sure of achieving even to that extent. It means not abandoning the pursuit of truth, even though if you want the truth rather than something to say, you will have a good deal less to say.’ Nagel, *View*, 9.

¹⁴ See discussion below on certainty and universality in the section 1.c below.

¹⁵ Nagel has in mind historicism and deflationary meta-philosophical theories like positivism and pragmatism: see pp. 11-12 of *View*, where describes these deflationary theories as ‘a vain effort to grow up too early’ and a denial of the ‘childhood of the intellect’ that is philosophy.

¹⁶ See section 1b. below and Nagel, *Last Word*, 7.

¹⁷ See Nagel, *View*, 13-17, on physical objectivity.

¹⁸ Nagel, *View*, 14-15.

in terms of a physical objectivity. He is strongly against all forms of psycho-physicalist reductionism of whatever form, be it ‘behaviouristic, causal, or functionalist’.¹⁹ He argues that such attempts to explain the mental in terms of the physical cannot ‘capture’ the subjective features of conscious mental processes.²⁰

Our minds as well as our bodies are, however, part of a conception of reality that importantly is, like physical reality, centreless.²¹

Though the subjective features of our own mind are the centre of *our* world, we must try to conceive of them as just one manifestation of the mental in a world that is not given especially to the human point of view[...] we are accustomed to thinking of particular things and events in the physical world as instances and manifestations of something general. We must think of mind as a phenomenon to which the human case is not necessarily central, even though our minds are at the centre of our world. The fundamental idea behind the objective impulse is that the world is not our world.²²

If we assume that we are not just parts of the world as it appears to us, but are part of the world as it is in itself, a true and full conception of objectivity must include us in it.²³ This conception of objectivity is one that includes ourselves, our minds as well as our bodies, in an objective conception which is not tied to our point of view.²⁴

Nagel describes how the objectification of the mental begins by the attempt to hold all human perspectives, including our own, *as perspectives*.²⁵ When we conceive of the minds of others, he says, we cannot rid ourselves of our point of view: instead,

¹⁹ Nagel, *View*, 15.

²⁰ This is why Nagel is sceptical of the attempts to understand the mind by analogy with man-made computers, an exercise he predicts will eventually be seen as a ‘gigantic waste of time’. Nagel, *View*, 16.

²¹ Nagel, *View*, 18.

²² Nagel, *View*, 18. See also the discussion in both *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament* and *Mind and Cosmos* about how it is necessary to see ourselves as part of the cosmos, not just the world or human community. The discussion in *Secular Philosophy* also considers how the religious idea is seen as a connection between the universal and the meaning of our life. Thomas Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* as above.

²³ Nagel, *View*, 17.

²⁴ Nagel, *View*, 17.

²⁵ Nagel, *View*, 20.

we have to think of ourselves in a general way and be aware that we are one point of view among many others. But this centreless mental conception is not like the ‘bleached out’ physical conception of objectivity, for crucially, it includes the interaction of our bodies with the rest of the world and our mental activity, an activity itself necessary to forming an objective conception of the physical world.²⁶ Perspectives and specific viewpoints are features of the mental world that we cannot discount when forming a conception of reality. To acknowledge this fact does not lead us to embrace subjectivism but rather a fuller, and hence truer, conception of objectivity.

As we have seen above, Nagel does not reject the subjective side of human thought, but it is the pursuit of objectivity that he identifies as the motivation for the advance of human knowledge. However, we cannot be at the centre of an objective understanding of reality that includes both the objective and the subjective. As Nagel says, ‘The way the world is includes appearances, and there is no single point of view from which they could all be grasped.’ Even though complete objectivity (the way the world is, including appearances) is not possible, he still thinks we should pursue it.²⁷ For ‘the pursuit of an objective understanding of reality is the only way to expand our knowledge of what there is beyond the way it appears to us.’²⁸

The centreless world of objectivity, then, is one of which we can only have partial knowledge, a partial knowledge that is the consequence of the quest for objectivity.²⁹ In pursuing objectivity we will have to accept that not everything real can be contained in our conception. ‘Reality’, says Nagel, ‘is not just objective reality, and any objective conception of reality must include an acknowledgement of its own incompleteness.’³⁰ So the objective impulse, the motivation arising from our human capacity to seek a more and more objective understanding of reality, leads to an acceptance of incompleteness.³¹ Nagel’s rationalist and realist³² pursuit of

²⁶ Nagel, *View*, 15.

²⁷ Nagel, *View*, 25.

²⁸ Nagel, *View*, 26.

²⁹ This follows from it not being ‘our world’ as suggested in the quotation above.

³⁰ Nagel, *View*, 26.

³¹ See the section on the incompleteness of objective reality, Nagel, *View*, 25-27.

³² Nagel is a realist, where realism is defined as a view that the world is independent of our minds: ‘I have at various points expressed commitment to a form of realism, and must now say more about it. In simple terms it is the view that the world is independent of our minds.’ *View*, 90

objectivity, in contrast to idealism, is thus epistemologically open both in process *and* in its goal:

In pursuing objectivity we alter our relation to the world, increasing the correctness of certain of our representations of it by compensating for the peculiarities of our point of view. But the world is in a strong sense independent of our possible representations, and may well extend beyond them. This has implications for what objectivity achieves when it is successful and for the possible limits of what we can achieve. Its aim and sole rationale is to increase our grasp of reality, but this makes no sense unless the idea of reality is not merely the idea of what can be grasped by those methods. In other words, *I want to resist the natural tendency to identify the idea of the world as it really is with the idea of what can be revealed, at the limit, by an indefinite increase in objectivity of standpoint.*³³

So whilst it is Nagel's rationalism that is the origin of his argument that the scope (and as we shall see below, also the depth) of knowledge is not limited, it is his philosophical realism that leads him to further conclude that objective knowing is an open-ended process. Incompleteness is inherent in the objective impulse directed towards the real world. This not because of 'the natural tendency' to 'an indefinite increase in the objectivity of standpoint', which would just be an *expanded subjectivity*. Instead the impulse for objectivity means we have to acknowledge that the world is centreless, that it is not dependent on the subject's standpoint.

Nagel has explained the role of realism in his epistemology of objectivity in the following way: 'realism is most compelling when we are forced to recognise the existence of something that we cannot describe, or know fully, because it lies beyond the reach of language, proof, evidence, or empirical understanding,' and 'once accepted in these cases it leads us to a realism about what we can understand as well.'³⁴ What Nagel implies in this further statement is that it is only by acknowledging what is infinite and unknown in the world that we can speak clearly about the known and the finite; this implied epistemological dependence of the finite

³³ Nagel, *View*, 91.

³⁴ Nagel, *View*, 108.

on the infinite is a subject I shall address further below.³⁵ Now, though, I shall consider the attack upon Nagel's epistemology made by Richard Rorty. We shall see that despite Rorty's profound criticisms Nagel is able to assert a coherent and consistent objectivism in epistemological and ethical domains.

1.b Rorty, Nagel and the 'view from nowhere'

The ambition for transcendence in Nagel's epistemological objectivism has been the focus of sustained attack from some contemporary philosophers and theologians.³⁶ Prominent amongst these critics is the philosopher Richard Rorty, a 'neo-pragmatist',³⁷ who disagrees with Nagel's philosophy in general and the 'view from nowhere' in particular.³⁸ His attack on Nagel's view that we are creatures with the impulse and capacity to transcend our particular point of view³⁹ can, for my purposes, be seen as comprising three main elements. Firstly, Rorty argues that all reasoning is fundamentally historical, local or contingent, as an evolutionarily produced capacity for coping with the realities in which we live; in other words, it is a matter of inter-subjectivity, and therefore eschews the search for objectivity implied in the view from nowhere.⁴⁰ Secondly he rejects the very notions of representation and correspondence fundamental to Nagel's realist theory of truth. Thirdly, he criticises Nagel's intuitive realism⁴¹ and objectivist epistemology as anachronistic and hence irrelevant for modern thinking. In this section I shall explain Rorty's points of criticism along these lines, focusing on Nagel's conception of the view from nowhere, and outline Nagel's response to

³⁵ In section 1.d below, where I discuss the nature of infinity in the philosophy of mathematics and the coincidence of mystery and clarity.

³⁶ 'It is necessary to combine the recognition of our contingency, our finitude, and our containment in the world with an ambition of transcendence, however limited may be our success in achieving it.' Nagel, *View*, p. 9.

³⁷ I explain the specific nature of Rorty's neo-pragmatism below.

³⁸ *The View From Nowhere* was first published in 1986, but Rorty had already criticised Nagel's epistemology in (amongst other works) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979) and *The Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays 1972-80)* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

³⁹ Nagel, *View*, p. 3.

⁴⁰ There are similarities between Rorty's historicist critique of the concept of rationality and that of Alasdair MacIntyre (see Introduction). However, MacIntyre's critique is not just of Enlightenment rationalism but also of liberal pluralistic philosophies – including that of Rorty.

⁴¹ See Rorty's discussion of Nagel's intuitive (rather than technical) realism in Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp. 17-26.

them. I will show how their disagreement is, at root, based on their contrasting views on the scope, depth and purpose of philosophy.

Rorty's neo-pragmatism follows the American tradition of William James and John Dewey, but his views on objectivity and truth sharply differentiate him from many others within that tradition.⁴² Rorty questions the validity of traditional problems of modern analytical philosophy basic to the framework of Nagel's perspectival philosophy, including Nagel's understanding of subject/object relations and the internal and external viewpoint within the self.⁴³ Rorty's neo-pragmatism, however, can be distinguished from linguistic idealism, though he shares the critique of epistemological objectivity put forward by certain continental philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Derrida.⁴⁴ For Rorty, what matters is the mutual understanding between language users rather than question of how language use can ground a mutual understanding of the world.⁴⁵ His neo-pragmatist position can also be distinguished from the more moderate epistemologically relativist positions of Davidson, Quine and Sellars, and his apparently 'radical' relativism has been criticised by Davidson as in effect a dismissal of, rather than a resolution of, epistemological issues associated with relativism.⁴⁶ Rorty argues for a

⁴² Other pragmatists have been prepared to consider non-absolutist conceptions of truth, including Charles Sanders Peirce. See Cheryl Misak 'Richard Rorty's place in the pragmatist pantheon', in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, ed. Randall E Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago, Open Court Publishing Company) pp. 27-43. See also Susan Haack, 'Vulgar pragmatism: An unedifying prospect' in *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to his Critics*, ed. Herman J. Saatkamp (Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), pp. 126-147.

⁴³ A general critique of the analytical understanding of the problems of philosophy of mind is the focus of 'Our glassy essence', Part 1 of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. See also the essay 'Science as solidarity', in *Objectivity, Relativism, Truth: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 35-45, where Rorty questions distinctions such as knowledge/opinion and facts/ideas.

⁴⁴ In his neo-pragmatist critique of objectivism Rorty aligns himself with philosophers from the continental tradition (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Habermas and Derrida). See, for example, the article 'Science as solidarity' in Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, pp. 40-44.

⁴⁵ See Christopher Tollefsen's article 'Cooperative, coordinative, and coercive epistemologies', in William P. Alston, ed., *Realism and Anti-Realism* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 155.

⁴⁶ In his neo-pragmatist critique of objectivism, Rorty also aligns himself with certain philosophers from the analytical tradition, including Wittgenstein, Quine, Sellars and Davidson, but he is more accurately considered an epistemological behaviourist. See *Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy* entry on Rorty, revised 2007 (<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rorty/>>; accessed 25 October 2014). Rorty himself denies that he is a relativist though, as Paul O'Grady explains, Rorty is committed to the view that ontology is relative and truth is not correspondence, views shared by other analytical philosophers such as Putnam and Quine. However, his radical position is differentiated from their 'moderate' epistemological relativism by his contention that there are no universal standards because enquiry is local, and a matter of cultural and historical context. See Paul O'Grady, *Relativism* (Chesham, Acumen, 2002) pp. 106-112.

‘conversational’ model of epistemology based on how words and thoughts are actually used in communities, as responses to certain problems, and as a way to meet particular needs and interests.⁴⁷ For Rorty *any* conception of ‘objectivity’, or search for objectivity, is a purely social phenomenon.⁴⁸

For Rorty, inter-subjectivity, i.e. human interaction at a local and contingent level, is all that is necessary to explain the nature of science, humanities or the arts, or morality and politics. Rorty therefore rejects Nagel’s position that we have the capacity, independent of experience, to consider what in general the world might possibly be like.⁴⁹ Nagel’s epistemology is an attempt to reconcile the perspective of a particular person inside the world with the ‘view from nowhere’, an objective view of that same world, whereas Rorty sees philosophical thinking as purely a matter of acquiring ‘habits of action for coping with reality’.⁵⁰ Whilst for Nagel our reasoning develops from the attempt to distinguish the subjective from the objective in moral and political thinking,⁵¹ for Rorty truth is dependent on the Jamesian criterion of ‘what it is best for us to believe’.⁵² Rorty maintains that ‘in the process of playing vocabularies and cultures off against each other we [can] produce better ways of thinking and acting’ and it is this, not the search for objectivity, that takes humanity forward.⁵³ Rorty insists that ‘[t]here is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we

⁴⁷ ‘Pragmatism is the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones – no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers’. From Rorty’s 1979 presidential address to the American Philosophical Association, quoted in Harvey Cormier, ‘Richard Rorty and Cornel West on the point of pragmatism’, in Auxier and Hahn, *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, pp. 73-101 (p. 77).

⁴⁸ ‘Whatever good the ideas of “objectivity” and “transcendence” have done for our culture can be attained equally well by the idea of a community which strives for inter-subjective agreement and novelty [...]. If one reinterprets objectivity as inter-subjectivity, or solidarity [...] then one will drop the question of how to get in touch with a “mind-independent and language-independent reality”. One will replace it with [...] political questions rather than metaphysical or epistemological questions.’ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 13.

⁴⁹ Nagel, *View*, p. 83.

⁵⁰ ‘The preservation and self-improvement of our communities, and through this the enhancement of civilization, is the only criterion of truth that we need.’ ‘Science as solidarity’, in Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 44.

⁵¹ See the discussion in Nagel, *The Last Word*, pp. 23-24. For Nagel the objective content of our ‘thought from the outside’ is revealed when we run up against certain limits in considering whether our beliefs and values are subjective or culturally relative.

⁵² William James *Pragmatism: A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975, 42 ‘The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite assignable reasons’

⁵³ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp. 25-26.

have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions'.⁵⁴

In his influential work *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty rejects Nagel's epistemological objectivism as an invalid attempt to 'climb out of our mind' to seek a mind-independent or language-independent reality or point of reference.⁵⁵ This rejection, of both the possibility of access to a reality external to the mind and the idea of knowledge as representation, is central to the second key point of disagreement between Nagel and Rorty. The central thrust of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is that we should stop thinking of the mind as a great mirror which holds representations of the world. Rorty rejects any correspondence theory of truth – we should not aim for truth or objectivity based on correspondence at all, but rather 'solidarity' or agreement with our peers.⁵⁶

We cannot find a skyhook which lifts us out of mere coherence – mere agreement – to something like 'correspondence with reality as it is in itself.' [...] Pragmatists would like to replace the desire for objectivity – the desire to be in touch with a reality which is more than some community with which we identify ourselves – with the desire for solidarity with that community.⁵⁷

Rorty contrasts his neo-pragmatic view of truth as 'democratic' with what he characterises as the 'elitist' view held by metaphysical realists such as Nagel.⁵⁸ This brings us to Rorty's third attack on Nagel's conception of the view from nowhere. Rorty sees the ambition for transcendence implicit in the 'view from nowhere' as a hangover from a previous 'divinisation' of our culture, and the rejection of it as a sign of progress. For Rorty, Nagel's metaphysical realism is a 'cultural lag' from the time of the Enlightenment, and specifically from the

⁵⁴ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xliii.

⁵⁵ See Rorty's introduction to *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 7. See also Nagel's article 'Rorty's pragmatism' in Nagel, *Concealment and Exposure*, pp. 161-162.

⁵⁶ Misak 'Richard Rorty's place' in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 27.

⁵⁷ Rorty, 'Science as solidarity', 38.

⁵⁸ 'Solidarity or objectivity' in Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 21-34 (p. 21). Rorty's position itself has come under attack for its anti-egalitarian and exclusive political implications as I shall discuss further below.

perspective of 17th- and 18th-century philosophers seeking to understand the world at a time of expanding scientific explanation.⁵⁹ He accuses Nagel of holding to an epistemologically-centred philosophy which should now give way to the development of a ‘post-philosophical culture’,⁶⁰ with edification rather than knowledge as its goal, where ‘the way things are said is more important than the possession of truths’.⁶¹ Keeping the ‘conversation’ going is, for Rorty, a sufficient aim for philosophy and, in as much as the desire for truth hinders the desire for edification, truth-seeking is problematic.⁶²

Nagel’s response to these key criticisms has been robust. He argues that if we accept Rorty’s view of reasoning as inevitably historical, local and contingent, of objectivity as a purely social phenomenon without reference to any mind-independent reality, and accept his subordination of truth to edification, then philosophy becomes a search for ‘comfort’ rather than truth.⁶³ In response to Rorty’s specific criticisms summarised above, Nagel himself makes three significant counter-arguments: firstly that Rorty’s neo-pragmatism leads him to illogical and nonsensical positions by limiting reasoning to the inter-subjective; secondly that Rorty’s rejection of universal standards for enquiry, which results from his adoption of a ‘consensus’ model of truth, lead him to a morally relativist position; and thirdly that Rorty is inconsistent because he actually holds certain philosophical positions whilst making the case for ‘post-philosophical culture’. In considering these counter-arguments I will draw out the importance of the open-ended nature of the *aspiration* for the view from nowhere, a feature of Nagel’s epistemology that, I will argue, Rorty fails to appreciate.

⁵⁹ ‘What prevents us from relaxing and enjoying the new fuzziness is perhaps no more than cultural lag, the fact that the rhetoric of the Enlightenment praised the emerging natural sciences in a vocabulary that was left over from a less liberal and tolerant era.’ Rorty, ‘Science as solidarity’, p. 44.

⁶⁰ See Rorty’s discussion of post-philosophical culture in *Consequences of Pragmatism* pp. 26-32, and *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* chapter 8, ‘Philosophy without mirrors’. See also Cormier, ‘Rorty and West’, p. 81.

⁶¹ See Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 359, where he identifies with Hans-Georg Gadamer’s criticism, in *Truth and Method*, of ‘scientific’ education as opposed to ‘classical’ education (which importantly has to include poetry), and Rorty’s distinction between the systematic philosophers and the ‘edifying ones’ such as Dewey, Wittgenstein and Heidegger who are sceptical and pragmatic (pp. 367-368).

⁶² See Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 360, where he defines edification as ‘the project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking’. This is related to his idea of a classical, as opposed to a scientific/systematic, paradigm for education.

⁶³ Nagel, ‘Rorty’s pragmatism’, 161-162. For Nagel, Rorty’s views mean that philosophy becomes ‘something less difficult and more shallow than it is’. Nagel, *View*, 11-12.

Firstly then, in direct contrast to Rorty's claim that the desire for objectivity is purely a product of socialisation and historical circumstance, Nagel maintains that reasoning goes 'all the way down'.⁶⁴ As he explains:

Those who challenge the rationalist position by arguing that what it appeals to at every stage are really contingent and perhaps local intuitions, practices, or conventions may attempt to apply this analysis all the way down the line, wherever a challenge to reason is met by further reasoning. But I do not see how they can terminate the process with a challenge that does not itself invite rational assessment.⁶⁵

For Nagel the 'self-evident air' of Rorty's conception of reason as consensus can be challenged by converting it into a specific or substantive claim which can then be subject to rational assessment.⁶⁶ Whilst a neo-pragmatist explanation can be given about the use of words, or solidarity within a particular community, it still leaves a logical (and common-sense) question concerning the correctness of any claim.⁶⁷ For example, to deny that the statement 'the hydrogen atom has one electron' is true independently of the human recognition of this, is for Nagel not only absurd in itself, but the position underlying such a denial also precludes us from affirming some of the most obvious and common-sense understandings of the nature and character of human knowledge which we take for granted in the common discourses of our daily lives. These include: the recognition that there are many truths about the world that we do not know; that some of these truths we may never know; that some of our current beliefs will in future be shown to be false; and that certain beliefs about the world are true, even if no one, at present, holds that view.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Nagel maintains that there is nothing 'below' reasoning that supports it – for example a conception of human nature: reasoning itself in the form of philosophy allows us access to a pre-linguistic and pre-cultural consciousness. See Nagel, *View*, 11: 'Philosophy is not like a particular language. Its sources are pre-verbal and pre-cultural.'

⁶⁵ Nagel, *Last Word*, 25.

⁶⁶ Nagel, *Last Word*, 29.

⁶⁷ See Nagel, 'Rorty's pragmatism', 160-161.

⁶⁸ See his discussion of the common views that the subjectivist denies in Nagel, *Last Word*, 30.

In response to Nagel's acceptance of obvious and common-sense claims about knowledge, Rorty attacks Nagel as an exemplar of a Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian foundationalism.⁶⁹ But this is an erroneous conflation of Nagel's position with other, very different, epistemological theories.⁷⁰ Nagel's well-worked-out epistemological objectivism is not dependent on any foundation in self-evident truth-claims, as we find in Cartesian thought, and Nagel actually accommodates the uncertainty in epistemology that Kant was so keen to avoid. In my comparison of Nagel's and Descartes' conceptions of reason, certainty and universality (in section 1.d) we will see how Nagel eschews the conception of self-evident truths as the basis for his rationalist epistemology. We will further see, in my analysis of Nagel's criticism of Kant's conception of *noumena* (in section 1.f), how he also rejects the importance of certainty for his rationalist epistemology.

These kinds of misrepresentation by Rorty of Nagel's epistemological position (cast as a version of Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian foundationalism) arise in large part because Rorty fails to acknowledge the 'open' nature of Nagel's epistemology most obviously present in his aspiration to the 'view from nowhere'. This 'open-ended' character derives expressly from the attempt to transcend our own point of view, for as we shall see it is precisely when we do this that we come up against our own creaturely limits and the *intrinsic incompleteness* of human knowledge. Far from espousing an 'elitist' view, therefore, as Rorty charges, I shall show that, for Nagel, a vital consequence of the pursuit of our reasoning towards an objective reality is in fact an integral disposition of intellectual humility; for in the process of this reasoning we will be compelled to acknowledge that there is much which we do not know, do not yet know, or cannot know.⁷¹

⁶⁹ See Rorty's explanation of this foundationalism in chapter 3 of Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, especially pp. 155-164. See also his related attack on Nagel's 'Cartesian' understanding of intuitions in both *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, with specific reference to his Nagel's 1974 essay 'What is it like to be a bat?'

⁷⁰ Rorty's radical epistemological relativism puts him at odds with an array of other analytical philosophers who hold to some version of the coherence theory, as well as those like Nagel who hold to the correspondence theory. See Linda Martin Alcoff, *Real Knowing: New Versions of the Coherence Theory* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996), 142. See above for Davidson's criticism of Rorty; see also note 11.

⁷¹ Nagel, *Last Word*, 30.

Nagel's second counter-argument concerns the validity of Rorty's 'consensus' model of truth. He suggests that such a consensus model can only actually work if it is based on 'the convergence among individuals, all reasoning to get *at* truth.'⁷² Nagel argues that the pursuit of an objective understanding of reality is essential, even if we can only know things partially, or without certainty. In his theory the attempt to combine the internal view, the viewpoint of a particular person or community, with an external view is vital not only for our understanding of the physical world but also for our practical reasoning, for as we shall see in chapter 4, Nagel maintains that moral judgements can be true or false independent of our beliefs.

Rorty's view that statements and beliefs are just 'items in the toolkit' which we use to survive and that 'truth is not their aim' means, for Nagel, that he has a morally relativist position, which throws up particular ethical problems. Nagel points out that if the justification for our beliefs and actions is always relative to purpose or aim, we deny the possibility of a judgement that the beliefs of another, though firmly held, are wrong – indeed we can say that even the most abhorrent views held by certain individuals or groups are 'right for them'.⁷³ Rorty refutes this relativist charge, insisting that his position is not relativism but an ethnocentrism consistent with his pragmatist view of truth as based on our conventions.⁷⁴ But the consequence of Rorty's model, whether it is seen as moral relativism or ethnocentrism, is that there is no room for a judgement that does not express his point of view.⁷⁵ This does not stop Rorty promoting a liberal political theory, but it is one based on an inter-subjective conception of social solidarity. Rorty advances a moral pluralism which is purely descriptive and proscribes any general judgements based on universal standards.⁷⁶ Later in this thesis I shall explore Nagel's very different rationalist justifications for his liberal

⁷² Nagel, *Last Word*, 31 (my emphasis).

⁷³ The example Nagel uses of 'what is true for them' is the Nazis' policy of genocide. See 'Rorty's pragmatism', 159.

⁷⁴ See Norman Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind: The Ungroundable Liberalism of Richard Rorty* (London, Verso, 1995), 120-121: 'Rorty regularly disavows relativism. He does not, he asserts, hold every belief about a topic to be as good as every other [...] what is less clear is what he offers that would make any ranking of beliefs more than an arbitrary, unarguable preference [...] it is a strange notion of relativism to propose that just having some ranking of viewpoints avoids it.'

⁷⁵ Nagel, 'Rorty's pragmatism', 159.

⁷⁶ See section 2.a in chapter 4 below, 'Objectivity and the allocation of value in a centreless world', where I explain the difference between descriptive pluralism and value-laden pluralism.

egalitarianism.

Rorty contrasts his pragmatic and ethnocentric view of truth, which he sees as ‘democratic’, with the ‘elitist’ view of metaphysical realists, but as we shall see below Nagel builds an egalitarian political theory on his realist and rationalist epistemology. For Nagel, if there was no attempt to view the world from a point tied to no particular view or perspective, there could be no aspiration for moral and political progress towards equality. Instead, Rorty has been criticised as elitist, with his ‘conversational’ approach seen as reinforcing the status quo of the already powerful. In his pragmatist critique of Rorty’s ethics, Paul Murray argues for a retention of a ‘notion of truth as an articulation of reality’, and criticises Rorty for ‘relinquishing the concern for the knowing, rather than merely redescribing, of reality [which gives] the floor over to the already powerful for them to determine what is deemed good in these parts’.⁷⁷ He questions whether ‘Rorty’s position is genuinely capable of supporting a conversation that remains always open to marginalised and dissident voices’, given the perception that he is an ‘elegant spokesman for the leisured classes’.⁷⁸

Similarly, Jo Burrows and Nancy Fraser have criticised Rorty’s neo-pragmatism as silencing voices from the margins. Fraser maintains that there is ‘no place in Rorty’s framework for *political* motivations for the invention of new idioms, no place for idioms invented to overcome the enforced silencing or muting of disadvantaged groups [...] for radical discourse communities that contest dominant discourses’.⁷⁹ Burrows queries whether Rorty’s neo-pragmatic, and hence non-ideological, approach deals satisfactorily with the stubborn facts of political life and wonders whether this non-ideological stance is in fact the familiar liberal notions of ‘free choice’ and ‘tolerance’ that ‘link him with the Enlightenment outlook [he] claims to have meta-outlived’.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Paul Murray, *Reason, Truth and Theology in Pragmatic Perspective* (Leuven, Peeters, 2004), 69.

⁷⁸ Murray, *Reason, Truth and Theology*, 79.

⁷⁹ Nancy Fraser, ‘Solidarity or singularity?’ in Alan R. Malachowski, ed., *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature and Beyond* (Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 1990), p303-321 (p. 316). Fraser questions Rorty’s separation of pragmatism from Romanticism, and hence of social solidarity from non-liberal thought.

⁸⁰ ‘My own view is that while Rorty *has* achieved worthwhile results in challenging specific features of the analytical tradition in philosophy, he has overstretched his resources when handling political issues. His deconstructive onslaught loses momentum when it reaches the stubborn difficulties of

For Nagel it is telling that relativists such as Rorty, who insist that their position is merely one of rejecting metaphysical excesses, actually make positive claims – claims which they then say cannot be subjected to rational assessment because they are subjective, or the product of an inevitable ethnocentrism.⁸¹ Nagel sums up this inconsistency by pointing out that Rorty ‘seems to support his denial of how things really are by appealing to a claim about how things really are – i.e. his Darwinian story’.⁸² The essence of Nagel’s third counter-argument against Rorty is that his conception of a ‘post-philosophical age’ is actually inconsistent and self-contradictory. Roy Bhaskar’s analysis of Rorty’s epistemological position, that it assumes a reductivist scientific naturalism *and* an anti-naturalist hermeneutics, supports Nagel’s argument.⁸³ Bhaskar views Rorty’s ‘poetic redescription of an already-determined world’ as actually biased towards a positivism-instrumentalism which stops him having either an adequate account of human agency or a conception of freedom as emancipation from real and knowable constraints.⁸⁴

It is important to note that in his narrative of the move to a post-philosophical age, Rorty again misrepresents Nagel. He sees Nagel’s conception that the world has an intrinsic nature as a ‘quasi-divinisation’ which is on a continuum with ‘outdated’ theological conceptions of a world creator and ideas of human nature. Tom Sorrell, however, has challenged Rorty’s analysis that holding a view on the intrinsic nature of the world means we must have picture of the universe as ‘either itself a person or as created by a person’.⁸⁵ Sorrell has also questioned the validity of the distinction

political life’. Jo Burrows, ‘Conversational politics: Rorty’s pragmatist apology for liberalism’ in Malachowski, *Reading Rorty* 322-338 (p. 324).

⁸¹ See Rorty, ‘Solidarity or objectivity?’, especially pp. 29-34.

⁸² Nagel, ‘Rorty’s pragmatism’, 159.

⁸³ Bhaskar has pointed out the ‘pervasive tension’ in Rorty’s influential *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* between ‘a hard-boiled scientific naturalism of a physicalistic deterministic cast’ and the promotion of an anti-naturalist hermeneutics based on the assumption of an irreducibility of norms, values and practices to facts and descriptions. See Roy Bhaskar, ‘Rorty, realism and the idea of freedom’ in Malachowski, *Reading Rorty* p198-232, especially pp. 212-217. See also Nagel, *Last Word*, 30-31, and ‘Rorty’s pragmatism’, 158-159.

⁸⁴ Bhaskar, ‘Rorty, realism’, 199.

⁸⁵ As Sorrell has pointed out Rorty’s narrative is based on an unhelpful polarisation between a literal interpretation of ‘the point of view of the world’, based on the idea of the world as a person, or created by a person, and the eschewing of objectivity altogether, a caricature of the ideas he seeks to discredit. Sorrell argues that Rorty models his conception of the accurate representation of reality on ‘the point of view of the world’ analogous with another *person*’s mental state, and wilfully ignores the fact that Nagel, Bernard Williams and other analytical philosophers retain the idea of the world’s intrinsic nature whilst rejecting any view of a world-creator or world-person. See Tom Sorrell, ‘The

between a scientific paradigm (the subject of ‘quasi-divinised’ philosophies according to Rorty) and the impetus for aesthetic edification, primarily through art and literature (the subject of ‘de-divinised’ philosophies according to Rorty).⁸⁶ Moreover, whilst as I shall show in the second part of this chapter, aspects of Nagel’s modern rationalism may have similarities with certain pre-modern epistemological categories, not least in his embracing of teleology, Nagel explicitly rejects theism.⁸⁷

With reference to Rorty as a prominent exemplar, I have sought in the above discussions to acknowledge what has been a broader critique in some circles of Nagel’s objectivist programme, and especially of his ‘view from nowhere’, which has been a special target of polemic. I have also sought in very preliminary ways to defend Nagel against these attacks by highlighting certain basic misreadings on which they are often based, while also in a prefatory way giving voice to Nagel’s own response to these charges, including his counter-charges. All of this will be demonstrated in greater critical detail in my own interpretive treatment of Nagel as the thesis progresses. But in the light of these kinds of criticism, it is important to repeat at this juncture that Nagel’s programme will be shown to be in key ways vitally different from the foundationalist programmes with which it is often grouped by its critics. While Nagel does indeed seek a universalism (as do also the Dionysian approaches explored in this thesis), the universalism aspired to in the ‘view from nowhere’, as we shall see, is incessantly self-critical, open to continual correction, and informed by a commitment to the inherent incompleteness of human knowledge. These are the marks of its intellectual humility. Moreover, the ‘detachment’ aspired to epistemologically in the ‘view from nowhere’, far from yielding a disengaged and aloof vantage point from which fully self-assured global judgments can be made, will be shown instead to serve as supplying the essential criteria for a proper, non-self-centred attentiveness, informed by justice and fairness, to the ethical and

world from its own point of view’ article, in Malachowski, *Reading Rorty*, p11-25 especially pp. 11-17.

⁸⁶ Sorrell, ‘The world’, 12. For an alternative to Rorty’s view of literature and its relation to philosophy see Kelly James Clark, ‘Fiction as a kind of philosophy’, William P. Alston, ed., *Realism and Antirealism* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2002), 280-293, where he defends the importance of narrative to moral realism.

⁸⁷ He does this in various works but most recently in the essay ‘Secular philosophy and the religious temperament’, in Nagel, *Secular Philosophy*; see also, Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, 12.

political realities of our daily lives, realities with which the ‘view from nowhere’ is inextricably interwoven.

1.c The depth of reason: To the unknown within

Having dealt in a preliminarily pre-emptive way with the basic criticisms mounted against Nagel, we can now return to his objectivist programme specifically to a consideration of how introspection takes us to a knowledge that is impersonal, though interior, and objective, though accessed from within. For according to Nagel the objective capacity of human beings has both an individual and a universal aspect. Reason is both something we access from within and something that can be applied to our understanding of the world, for ‘reason [...] is something each individual can find within himself, but at the same time it has universal authority.’⁸⁸ He explains that it is precisely the relationship our reason establishes between the particular and the universal that makes it ‘permanently puzzling [...] and what makes it so difficult to arrive at a satisfactory attitude towards it.’⁸⁹ Nagel has a concept of an objective capacity of the mind that can place us both ‘inside and outside of the world’, and also, significantly, provides us with conceptions that can be ‘universally shared’.⁹⁰ These shared conceptions depend upon Nagel’s understanding of the objective self, existing as a realm *within* the individual self. Nagel’s realist assertion of the incompleteness of our knowledge of objective reality, then, can be applied as much to knowledge of ourselves as to our knowledge of the world around us. In order to explain in some way this puzzling relationship between the particular and universal, Nagel turns to a conception of reason as accessing a *deeper* part of oneself.

Reason allows us to reach vastly beyond ourselves and tap deeper resources within, to access what Nagel describes as a ‘latent objective realm’.⁹¹ This is the realm of the objective self which, according to Nagel, leads a life of its own with autonomous development, and is in some sense real.⁹² This objective self is, he says, ‘trapped

⁸⁸ Nagel, *Last Word*, 3.

⁸⁹ Nagel, *Last Word*, 70.

⁹⁰ Nagel, *View*, 66.

⁹¹ ‘[Each] of us is a microcosm, and in detaching progressively from our point of view and forming a succession of higher views of ourselves in the world, we are occupying a territory that already exists; taking possession of a latent objective realm, so to speak.’ Nagel, *View*, 82-83.

⁹² Nagel, *View*, 66. I shall address the nature of Nagel’s concept of the objective self in my critical discussion of his apparent metaphysical realism in section 3.e.

initially behind an individual perspective of human experience’, but in our search for objectivity we should aim for its ‘gradual liberation’ and its eventual coexistence with and mutual comprehension of the individual self.⁹³ As we acknowledge this ‘latent objective realm’, we have to ‘rely less and less on certain individual points of view, and more and more on something else, less individual, which is also part of us.’⁹⁴

The latent objective realm, then, is accessed by progressive detachment from our individual point of view.⁹⁵ Nagel often explains this detachment in terms that he himself admits are ‘austere’. The objective self is far removed from the individual empirical self as a result of countless abstractions from specific perspectives.⁹⁶ In *The View from Nowhere* Nagel uses a geometric analogy to explain this process and its eventual end – the objective self, he says, is the last stage of the detaching subject before it shrinks to an extensionless point.⁹⁷

A realism about our finitude allows us to be open to a reality beyond our understanding, and this means an openness to what is beyond *and within*. An acknowledgement of the depth of reason within, this latent objective realm, echoes the impersonal and dynamic concept of intellect found in Neoplatonic and Patristic

⁹³ Nagel, *View*, 85-86.

⁹⁴ ‘The most familiar scene of conflict [between the power of objective knowledge to expand our understanding and the doubts and insecurities that accompany it] is the pursuit of objective knowledge, whose aim is naturally described in terms that, taken literally, are unintelligible: we must get outside of ourselves, and view the world from nowhere within it. Since it is impossible to leave one’s point of view behind without ceasing to exist, the metaphor of getting outside ourselves must have another meaning. We are to rely less and less on certain individual aspects of our point of view, and more and more on something else, less individual, which is also a part of us.’ Nagel, *View*, 67.

⁹⁵ Nagel, *View*, 82-83.

⁹⁶ Nagel, *View*, 63.

⁹⁷ Nagel, *View*, note on p. 62. See also Marcia Sá Cavalcante Shuback’s essay ‘The Fragility of the One’, where she discusses the idea of the point as negative in the context of the abstraction of modern art. Kandinsky defined the geometric point as ‘invisible being’, as an element of his ‘non-representative art’ and Sá Cavalcante Shuback interprets his conception of the point as a fragile point of singularity ‘neither a point of oneness nor of otherness but a between one and other’ in the sense of ‘between’ proposed by Heidegger. Marcia Sá Cavalcante Shuback, ‘The Fragility of the One’, in Magun, *Politics*, 17. Sá Cavalcante Shuback further associates this understanding with ‘ancient ontology’, where the ‘exilic in-between’ is a relationship between the singular life of the one and the cosmic life of the whole. She sees this human exilic existence as expressed in the Dionysian tradition, severed from its divine origin and longing for return to dissolution in divine existence (‘a tragic cut between mortal and immortal life, between the human and the divine within the one of the cosmos, almost as a canvas by Fontana’). Sá Cavalcante Shuback, ‘Fragility’, 18.

thinkers.⁹⁸ Their view was that the human intellect is essentially epistemologically responsive,⁹⁹ and we see this idea in Nagel too. Whilst in Neoplatonic and Patristic thought this responsiveness is to the divine mind, in Nagel's epistemology our human understanding is a response as finite creatures to our dependence on the independently existing real world.¹⁰⁰ Our contingency and containment in the world therefore has to be acknowledged, along with our ambition for transcendence.¹⁰¹

The acknowledgement of the depth of the unknown within is evidence that Nagel's realism has a teleological character. He accepts firstly that we have to engage with what is unknown in our knowing, secondly that the goal of knowing is incomplete, and thirdly that the subjective cannot be explained away in terms of the objective. All these epistemological features show a more open and holistic approach to reason than is claimed by those who characterise the 'view from nowhere' as that from a disembodied and unsituated mind.¹⁰²

Nagel's approach to the place of the unknown in human reasoning contrasts interestingly with the Kantian approach that would corral the unknown into an 'empty' concept of the noumena, a strategy which Nagel believes limits the scope and depth of human understanding. I shall be considering the difference between Kant's noumena and Nagel's use of the unknown below, but before that I shall address the relationship between certainty and universality in Nagel's understanding of reason, and the charges of foundationalism that are laid against him.

1.d Reason, certainty and universality

Nagel has a particular understanding of the self-orientating nature of reason - that is, it cannot be explained in terms of something else. As he says, 'in order to have the authority it claims, reason must be a form or category of thought from which there is

⁹⁸ See chapter 1 for the historical context of this claim; see also the discussion of the Neoplatonic metaphysical system in chapter 2.

⁹⁹ And, as I noted in chapter 2, passive.

¹⁰⁰ And for Nagel the concept of self is also a given. See Nagel, *View*, 119.

¹⁰¹ Nagel, *View*, 9.

¹⁰² See discussion in section 1.a above.

no appeal beyond itself.’¹⁰³ Nagel is a non-naturalist¹⁰⁴ and opposes those who would explain reason by psychologism, linguistic practices or biology.¹⁰⁵ He also opposes idealism of the mind. Although in its subjective focus this idealism may appear to have much in common with an approach of introspection, it is fundamentally different from the Nagel’s rationalism.

Nagel follows the Cartesian tradition of epistemology developed from a priori reasoning, though crucially he dispenses with dependence on the absolute certainty of propositional proofs.¹⁰⁶ Nagel’s reading of Descartes’ rationalist epistemology emphasises Descartes’ rigorous use of reason, but sees his aspiration to universality as key.¹⁰⁷ Rather than making the search for certainty the primary approach of his philosophy, as it is for Descartes, Nagel sees the commitment to universality he finds in Descartes’ philosophy as more important for the development of the rationalist tradition.¹⁰⁸ To put it another way, Nagel does not want the price paid for a *secure* foundation to be a limitation of the aspiration to *universal* validity.

Nagel dismisses the contemporary characterisation of the difference between the Cartesian rationalist approach to epistemology and postmodern epistemological relativism as essentially a disagreement on the possibilities of foundationalism.¹⁰⁹ Instead he sees the more important contrast between these two approaches as the aspiration, or absence thereof, to objectivity and universality. His rationalism, he

¹⁰³ See Nagel, *Last Word*, 7. See also Paul Janz, *God, the Mind’s Desire*, 51. The issue of the authority of reason, specifically its moral authority, will be considered in my discussion on Nagel’s ethics in chapter 4.

¹⁰⁴ Both in his epistemology and in his ethics; he often appears to conflate an objectivist view with a non-naturalist view. However, there are examples of objective naturalism, for example Teilhard de Chardin’s process theology.

¹⁰⁵ For example in *The Last Word*, where he explains why he rejects the idea that ‘the deepest level of our knowledge, thought and understanding must be through the analysis of language,’ and how this leads to psychologism and relativism (Nagel, *Last Word*, 37). See also *View*, 78-81 on evolutionary epistemology, as well as Nagel’s discussion of naturalism and religion in chapter 7 of *The Last Word*, where he argues against evolutionary naturalist explanations of human reason such as that of Robert Nozick.

¹⁰⁶ Nagel, *View*, 70.

¹⁰⁷ Nagel, *Last Word*, 19-26.

¹⁰⁸ Nagel, *Last Word*, 18.

¹⁰⁹ ‘[The] real character of reason is not found in belief in a set of “foundational” propositions, not even in a set of procedures or rules for drawing inferences, but rather in any forms of thought to which there is no alternative [...] That implies *universal* validity.’ The rules of logic are an example of the ‘thoughts to which there is no alternative’, but Nagel makes clear that these impersonal thoughts have no set realm and also apply to matters of moral reasoning. Nagel, *Last Word*, 68-69.

insists, does not require assent to a ‘closed set of self-evident foundational truths’.¹¹⁰ As we have seen above in our discussion on the scope and depth of reason, Nagel’s rationalist realism is an open epistemology. The search for universal validity will, he believes, always mean being open to revising one’s beliefs.¹¹¹ However, we can eventually reach a ‘finally impersonal domain’ (where the real character of reason is found) when we arrive at forms of thought to which there is no alternative.¹¹²

So Nagel and Descartes, though sharing an introspective starting point for their epistemologies, differ in their emphasis on certainty and universal validity. Certainty is key for Descartes, whilst for Nagel universal validity is more important. Nagel concurs with the overall Cartesian rationalist aim for an explanation of the world that includes the concept of oneself, a justification for the validity of such a conception of oneself in the world, and a justification for the ability to think of this conception at all. However Nagel’s method of self-transcendence by which the objective self can ‘ascend’ to universally valid knowledge does not derive from the Cartesian aim for certainty.¹¹³

Instead of answering the challenge of scepticism directly as Descartes does, Nagel justifies his realist approach in terms of the consequences of his epistemology overall. The conception of the world that accords with our impulse to be objective does not have to dispel all uncertainty. He accepts that the search for objective knowledge will be accompanied by scepticism,¹¹⁴ but that does not distract us from our objective impulse to understand reality. He sees scepticism and objective knowledge as ‘products of one capacity: the capacity to fill out the pure idea of

¹¹⁰ ‘The aim of universal validity is compatible with the willingness always to consider alternatives and counterarguments – *but they must be considered as candidates for objectively valid alternatives and arguments*. It is possible to accept a form of rationalism without committing oneself to a closed set of self-evident foundational truths’ [Nagel’s emphasis]. Nagel, *Last Word*, 69.

¹¹¹ Nagel, *Last Word*, 69.

¹¹² Nagel, *Last Word*, 68-69.

¹¹³ Having described the importance of detachment and self transformation in the task of the essential self, Nagel says: ‘this idea of objective knowledge has something in common with the program of Descartes [...] But his method was supposed to depend only on propositions and steps that were absolutely certain, and the method of self-transcendence as I have described it does not necessarily have this feature. In fact, such a conception of the world need not be developed by proofs at all, though it must rely heavily on a priori conjecture.’ Nagel, *View*, 70.

¹¹⁴ He defines scepticism as follows: ‘Thought purports to represent facts and possibilities beyond itself, and scepticism is the view that our thoughts themselves give us no way of telling whether they correspond enough to the nature of actual and possible reality to be able to make contact with it at all – even to the extent of permitting false beliefs about it.’ Nagel, *View*, 99.

realism with more or less definite conceptions of the world in which we are placed”.¹¹⁵ The capacity for scepticism arises because of the open-ended search for objectivity. A closed epistemological system, such as idealism, may rule out scepticism, but as a consequence we will be limited in what we can say about reality.

We can see that Nagel, by letting go of certainty as the absolute epistemological criterion, is able to maintain an open epistemology with infinite scope and depth. What is unknown is allowed to exist within his overall epistemological picture rather than being placed beyond the scope of human knowing. In this next section I shall examine Nagel’s understanding of the connections between infinite thoughts and our finite existence.

1.e The infinite within the finite

For Nagel a key feature of the aspiration to objectivity is an acknowledgement of our capacity as finite beings to think infinite thoughts. This, he says, tells us something about the nature of reason, for ‘if there is such a thing as reason, it is a local activity of finite creatures that somehow enables them to make contact with universal truths, often of infinite range,’ adding that ‘there is always a powerful temptation to think that this is impossible.’¹¹⁶ Yet, as he explains, that temptation would unnecessarily restrict our understanding of even the most apparently finite things. The fact that we, as finite beings, can access infinite thoughts is for Nagel the starting point for an explanation of an epistemology that takes seriously the objective content of our thoughts.

Nagel uses an example from the philosophy of mathematics to illustrate the issues at stake in his assertion that we as finite beings can think infinite thoughts. Considering the infinite nature of number sequences, he describes how the local, finite practice of counting implies an incompleteness when viewed ‘internally’.¹¹⁷ He sees any understanding of the practice of counting that does not include the internal perspective, i.e. a perspective where the incompleteness of any series of natural

¹¹⁵ See *View*, 70-71, and his discussion on scepticism and anti-scepticism in chapter 5.

¹¹⁶ Nagel, *Last Word*, 70.

¹¹⁷ Nagel, *Last Word*, 73. For an understanding of the internal/external distinction and the view from the inside/outside, see the discussion that follows in this section.

numbers is the logical result of the very concept of a number, as reductionist. We may only know the specific numbers of certain sequences but to make sense of them we have to consider them in the context of an infinite sequence. Access to infinity arises from the finite capacity to count from what we acknowledge as fragments. It is the incompleteness of the sequence that enables us to have access to the infinite. As he explains, we cannot reduce the apparently infinite to the finite: ‘instead the apparently finite must be explained in terms of the infinite.’¹¹⁸

Karen Kilby has also explored the place of the infinite in the philosophy of mathematics (and the lessons that result for theology).¹¹⁹ She has shown how the concept of infinity, whilst a key part of theories of number, sets and limits, illustrates the incomprehensibility at the heart of these concepts.¹²⁰ She has drawn out the proof of the ‘unmasterability’ of numbers in Euclid’s proof of the infinity of primes, Georg Cantor’s proof that real numbers are uncountable, and Gödel’s incompleteness theorem.¹²¹ These examples illustrate what Kilby sees as the coexistence of mystery and clarity at the heart of the mathematics of infinity:

In mathematics, then, we find points at least, where our clarity about something and our awareness of it escaping us, its ungraspability, go hand in hand. As we get more clear, we become more aware of the way in which the thing exceeds us, exceeds our imagination and our comprehension. Or again, we find points where clarity and certainty do not serve to fortify any system of reduction and control, but precisely to

¹¹⁸ Nagel, *Last Word*, 71.

¹¹⁹ Karen Kilby, ‘Mathematics, Infinity and the Mystery of God’; paper delivered to the Research Institute in Systematic Theology at King’s College, London, 17 October 2006.

¹²⁰ The thrust of Kilby’s paper is to show how the ‘acknowledgement of mystery and the intellectual aims of theology are related to each other’. She uses examples in the philosophy of mathematics to illustrate how issues of clarity and mystery, the ways of knowing and unknowing are related: ‘very often pure mathematics does not offer calculation and control, but articulates the uncontrollability, the non-manipulability, the incalculability of things.’ Later in her paper she develops the theme of the non-competitive relationship between theology and mystery in the works of Karl Rahner, Kathryn Tanner, and Denys Turner. She concludes by making two points: first that the acknowledgement of mystery in theology is not an abandonment of rationality or responsibility, and second, that the issue of mystery in theology extends much more broadly than discussion of apophatic theology.

¹²¹ In her consideration of Georg Cantor’s theory of infinite sets, Kilby explains how he shows that real numbers are uncountable through his proof that the set of natural numbers is the same size as the set of rational numbers, despite there being a whole infinity of rational numbers between any two natural numbers, and that the set of real numbers is a ‘bigger infinity’ than are the natural or rational numbers, despite them also being infinite. In relation to Gödel, she explains how he has shown that there is an infinity in mathematics which eludes any axiomatic systemisation.

finally and definitively undercut the possibility of a reductionist, controlling programme.¹²²

But the important point both Kilby and Nagel are making it is not merely about the philosophically elusive concept of infinity. They are drawing our attention to the nature of the *finite*.¹²³ To return to Nagel's example of the finite and local activity of counting: to describe a finite practice from the outside, we see something that 'may look small and "natural"', but it becomes vast and infinite and 'opens out to burst the boundaries of that external naturalistic view' when considered internally.¹²⁴

In this section I have referred to Nagel's distinction between the internal and external view. This is allied to his distinction between 'thought from the outside' and 'thought from the inside'.¹²⁵ Nagel sees the use and validity of examining our thoughts from the outside, particularly for the self-awareness necessary to ethical and social thought.¹²⁶ The practice of counting, as we have seen above, is an example that shows the difference between these two distinct modes of thought.

Other examples that illustrate this difference include concepts that appear to be fundamental to finite beings, such as the concepts of 'I' and 'now'. Neither of these concepts are easily explainable as real in any common-sense way when considered

¹²² Applying the same logic to the subject matter of theology, Kilby asks: 'Do theology and mystery stand in a competitive relationship, so that the more successful theology is, the smaller the realm of mystery, or perhaps the more penetrable the mysterious is, or in a non-competitive relationship, so that the more successfully theology performs its task, the more radically the mysteriousness of its subject matter can be acknowledged?' This non-competitive relationship fits with Denys Turner's observation that competition between the 'territories' of faith and reason based on a reductive conception of the intellect to 'a capacity for those attenuated forms of ratiocination whose paradigms are those of mathematical argument or else of empirical justification'. Turner, introduction to *Faith*, xv.

¹²³ Another example from science that illustrates how mystery and clarity can coexist in the advancement of knowledge is the twists and turns of our empirical understanding of the nature of matter in the 20th century. Theoretical physicists have had to adopt metaphysical speculation on a grand scale in order to bring together new empirical observations in a form of explanation. What should make things clearer, i.e. 'concrete' data from the cutting edge of technological advance, leads us beyond the hypothesis-test-result model of science.

¹²⁴ Nagel, *Last Word*, 75. It is worth drawing a comparison between Nagel's observation here and the point made in the discussion on mystical realism in chapter 2 (see also note 43) that in Plotinian understanding of matter its appearance in the empirical world has the same characteristics as the *One*, being *boundless*, unlimited and immeasurable.

¹²⁵ Nagel on thought from inside/outside, see *Last Word*, chapter 2.

¹²⁶ See *Last Word* pp. 13-14.

‘from the inside’. In fact they are apparently incomprehensible.¹²⁷ Nagel has identified problems with the concept of ‘now’, pointing out that ‘there is no room in a fully objective description of the world for the identification of a particular time as the present’.¹²⁸ He goes on to say ‘the temporal order of events can be described from no point of view within the world. Yet the fact that it is *now* the particular time that it is seems to be fundamental truth which we cannot do without. The tenseless description of the temporal order is essentially incomplete, for it leaves out the passage of time.’¹²⁹ Similarly, for Nagel the extensionless point of view of the detaching subject, the perspective of the objective self, leaves out the concept of ‘I’.¹³⁰

Nagel sees this differentiation of thought from the inside/outside as key for a justification, or otherwise, of subjectivism. Whilst he recognises the challenge of subjectivism, Nagel gives the ‘last word’ to the justifications of reasoning rather than the reasoner.¹³¹ His epistemology is a claim for the primacy of reasoning itself (because it cannot be explained in terms of anything else), a claim for the primacy of objectivity,¹³² and a claim for the aspiration to universality in rational thought.¹³³

What we think we can quantify and know from observation from the outside, when viewed internally becomes something that is beyond our comprehension but is still a necessary concept for our understanding. It is the role of what is beyond our current human conceptions, i.e. *that which we do not or cannot know* but is epistemologically necessary, that we will discuss in the next section.

¹²⁷ See Nagel, *View*, 57-59.

¹²⁸ See Nagel, *View*, 57 note, where he refers to Dummett’s paper ‘A Defence of McTaggart’s proof of the Unreality of Time’.

¹²⁹ Nagel, *View*, 57 note.

¹³⁰ See Nagel, *View*, 62 note, and also the discussion in section 1.b above on accessing the latent objective realm.

¹³¹ See Nagel, *Last Word* chapter 2 on ‘thought from the outside’, particularly section iv.

¹³² ‘The concept of subjectivity always demands an objective framework, within which the subject is located and his special perspective or set of responses described. We cannot leave the standpoint of justification completely, and it drives us to seek objective grounds.’ Nagel, *Last Word*, 16.

¹³³ ‘The thoughts that enter into such a criticism [of our system of beliefs] must aspire to a universality that is lacking in the thoughts criticised.’ Nagel, *Last Word*, 16.

1.f Nagel's criticism of Kant's concept of noumena

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant says that sense and understanding 'perhaps spring from a common, but to us unknown, root'.¹³⁴ The epistemological differences between Kant and Nagel are in many ways a result of the strategies they employ to deal with the 'to us unknown'. The positive engagement with the unknown in Nagel's epistemology is in contrast to the negative and regulatory function of the noumenon in Kant's epistemology.

Nagel and Kant agree that 'how things are in themselves transcends all possible appearances or human conceptions.'¹³⁵ Kant's epistemological strategy is then to locate that which is unknowable to human beings within the nature of 'things in themselves'. But for Nagel this is a 'nonexplanation [of the nature of the real world]' that makes 'the inconceivable noumenal [...] just a placeholder for something beyond our comprehension.'¹³⁶ Further, he thinks this strategy leads to a restriction on how we can think about the objective reality of the world. It stands in contrast with his open realism of a world that we do not and will not necessarily know. Nagel criticises Kant for making the unknown the unknowable, a result of an accommodation with scepticism.¹³⁷

Kant's conception of the noumenon (the 'thing in itself') is a negative and limiting concept. The noumenon is described in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as 'that which ought to be thought of not at all as an object of the senses, but rather as a thing in itself' (merely through the pure understanding).¹³⁸ It is, as Keller explains, 'a limiting concept for theoretical reason of which we have no theoretical

¹³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan, 1929), 46 B 29.

¹³⁵ Nagel, *View*, 101.

¹³⁶ In his discussion of objections to physical realism, Nagel argues: 'at some level the explanation of the fact that so far all our theories of the physical world involve spatial extension might conceivably be explained in terms of something entirely different, something which we might or might not be able to grasp. But Kant's nonexplanation in terms of the inconceivable noumenal world is not that better alternative. It is just a placeholder for something beyond our comprehension, and there is no reason to accept it unless the available realist position, ascribing extension to things in themselves, is ruled out as impossible.' Nagel, *View*, 103.

¹³⁷ See Nagel, *View*, 99; see also the discussion above in 1.a in Nagel's understanding of the relation between realism and scepticism.

¹³⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A 255/B 310.

knowledge'.¹³⁹ Stephan Körner sees the Kantian noumena as ruled by a negative governing principle, literally as not-phenomena, i.e. as an 'entity of the understanding to which no objects of experience can ever correspond'.¹⁴⁰ The noumenon is then defined then as something we *cannot* experience. It is an essentially empty concept for us.¹⁴¹

Paul Janz offers an affirmative reading of Kant's concept of noumena. Its problematic nature, he argues, is nothing to do with any ambiguous metaphysical status, rather the qualifications Kant makes when describing the noumena are his way of formulating 'a logical guarantee of the thoroughly conceptual and problematic (and hence non-ontological) status of the noumena'.¹⁴² Janz argues that the significance of the qualifications 'for us' that Kant uses, is not an admission of the possibility of the noumena being mind-independently real, but rather the function of the noumena to direct reason back to its empirical use.¹⁴³ The separation between the rational and sensory faculties of the mind is, in Kantian thought, a *logical* separation which is overcome in the synthesis of sensible intuition and intellect.¹⁴⁴

Whatever interpretation one takes of the problematic nature of the noumenon, it is clear that for Nagel any version of Kant's transcendental idealism is reductionist. Nagel argues that Kant 'tries to explain the mind-independent features of reason and the world in an ultimately mind-dependent form'.¹⁴⁵ In Nagel's view, when Kant

¹³⁹ Pierre Keller, *Kant and the Demands of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 230.

¹⁴⁰ Stephan Körner, *Kant* (London: Penguin 1970), 94.

¹⁴¹ 'In the end however we have no insight into the possibility of such noumena and the domain outside the sphere of appearances is empty (for us).' Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A255. See below for further discussion on the significance of 'for us'.

¹⁴² See chapter 6 in Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire*, especially pp. 144-45. Janz makes this clear by quoting Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A287, with the following emphasis: '[The] concept of a noumenon is problematic, i.e., the presentation of a thing of which we can say neither that it is possible nor that it is impossible, *since we are acquainted* with no sort of intuition *other than our own sensible one*, and no other sort of concepts other than the categories [of the understanding] neither of which [...] is suitable to an extra-sensible object.'

¹⁴³ See Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire*, chapter 6, especially his section on noumena as regulatory entities, pp. 160-67. See also Pierre Keller's discussion of the weak and strong versions of Kant's transcendental idealism in *Kant*, chapter 11.

¹⁴⁴ See Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire*, 153.

¹⁴⁵ 'The constant temptation towards reductionism – the explanation of reason in terms of something less fundamental – comes from treating our capacity to engage in it as the primary clue as to what it is. The greatest monument to this temptation is the Kantian project, which tries to explain the mind-independent features of reason and the world in an ultimately mind-dependent form.' Nagel, *Last Word*, 74-75.

says that how things appear to us limits how we can conceive them, he ends up reducing human reason to our capacity to reason, and thus limiting our a priori knowledge to the application of a small range of perspectival principles.¹⁴⁶

Whilst Nagel believes that there is no good reason to rule out a metaphysically realist position, that things in themselves have extension, Janz sees Nagel's realism as an aspect of the 'dogmatism' that Kant wished to avoid in his epistemology.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, Janz sees the assertion of the mind-independent nature of the empirical object as

violating its *integral* nature by claiming in effect that its spatio-temporality be understood apart from its *manifestedness* as such. For the 'in itself' is precisely the aspiration to purest objectivity, that is, to an object of pure reason that has been purified of all empirical uncertainties and imperfections, and which is thus somehow 'open' to rational scrutiny and jurisdiction beyond the contingencies of sense.¹⁴⁸

Janz criticises Nagel for the inappropriate use of intellect in his conception of the empirical world. He believes Nagel makes a category mistake in using logical principles to explain the extensiveness of an object. Janz sees the noumena 'as a genuinely transcendental (i.e. a priori) *deduction* of the pure idea or noumenon itself'¹⁴⁹ As such they receive 'validation or their proof in virtue of their ability both to enlarge and to simplify the field of reasoning *in their empirical use*'.¹⁵⁰ It is in this way, Janz argues, that reason's claims to universality are preserved. The starting point of Kant's philosophy, says Janz, is based on a conception of the givenness of

¹⁴⁶ See Nagel's discussion in chapter 6.3 of *View*: 'Kant's position is that we can conceive of things only as they appear to us and never as they are in themselves: how things are in themselves remains forever and entirely out of the reach of our thought.' Nagel, *View*, 99. Nagel goes on to say that he disagrees that we know things *only* as they appear to us, but agrees with Kant that 'how things are in themselves transcends all possible appearances or human conceptions', for 'the content of some thoughts transcends every form they can take in the human mind.' Nagel, *View*, 101-02.

¹⁴⁷ See Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire*, introduction and his chapter on Kant.

¹⁴⁸ See Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire*, 155. Expanding on his understanding of the need to acknowledge the integrity of the empirical object as empirical, Janz goes on to say: 'When the empirical object is permitted to be what it is – that is the object as it appears, or the object that appears, that empirical integrity is allowed to remain intact and its genuine otherness or over againstness is presumed.' Janz, *God The Mind's Desire*, 156.

¹⁴⁹ Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire*, 146.

¹⁵⁰ Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire*, 146.

the empirical.¹⁵¹ It is deeply connected with the receptive character of human sensibility or intuition – a concept that implies that it is inherently mediated.¹⁵²

Janz's defence of Kant is not, however, immune to a meta-criticism of Kant's epistemological approach to truth. For Kant, as Paul O'Grady explains, maintains universal principles of rationality in knowledge but denies our ability to discuss the ultimate nature of reality.¹⁵³ It is because of this separation between ontology and epistemology that we see Kant circumscribing the scope of reason.¹⁵⁴ Instead of dealing with metaphysical questions themselves, he provides only epistemic answers.¹⁵⁵

Kant's explicit aim in developing his transcendental idealism was 'to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith'.¹⁵⁶ Yet the contentless and empty noumenon that are the logical consequence of this transcendental idealism become, Nagel maintains, a mere 'placeholder' for the incomprehensible. Nagel's fundamental criticism of Kant's epistemology is that his noumena/phenomena distinction is invalid, for it unnecessarily restricts the scope of human reason to the *phenomenal* world.

2. The View from Nowhere – Abstraction, or Ambition for Transcendence?

Having explained Nagel's epistemology of objectivity, I wish to conclude this chapter by drawing out historical and theoretical connections between this and some basic concepts of Plotinian thought. What Nagel expounds as the aspiration to the 'view from nowhere' can be seen as a process of abstraction that is the result of his highly analytical and rationalist approach. Yet Nagel's fundamental epistemological assumptions, such as his starting point of introspection, his repudiation of certainty as an ultimate truth criterion, and the primacy he gives to the a priori, have

¹⁵¹ Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire*, 145-52.

¹⁵² Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire*, 146.

¹⁵³ Paul O'Grady, *Relativism* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2002), 55-56. There are different interpretations of this denial.

¹⁵⁴ See O'Grady on the limits of reason, in *Relativism*, 177-81.

¹⁵⁵ O'Grady, *Relativism*, 41.

¹⁵⁶ From the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787): 'I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.'

similarities with the epistemology of Plotinus which, as we have seen, forms the theoretical framework of Dionysian apophaticism.

In section 2.a below I will suggest that Nagel's presumption of the objective self's capacity for and impetus towards the 'view from nowhere' is closer to the strain of Neoplatonism we find in Plotinus than the modern Cartesian epistemological tradition he is often associated with. Having established these historical and theoretical connections, I will go on to discuss the specific similarities and differences between the aspiration of Nagel's 'view from nowhere' and the Plotinian concept of objectiveless awareness.

In section 2.c I shall draw comparisons between the concept of Plotinian 'mystical realism' I identified in chapter 2 and Nagel's realism. Nagel's realism 'grounds' his aspiration to the view from nowhere, yet also opens up the scope and depth of reason. The ambition for the view from nowhere is allied to the open nature of Nagel's realism I have described above,¹⁵⁷ an openness that is a characteristic of knowledge of one's self as well as knowledge of the world.¹⁵⁸

2.a Introspection in Plotinus and Nagel

Sara Rappe points out that there is a historical connection from Plotinus, through Descartes, to modern rationalism.¹⁵⁹ She argues that Descartes' concept of introspection has been misunderstood in modern philosophy because this connection is not acknowledged.¹⁶⁰ Her main criticism of current deconstructionist and relativist criticism of the *res cogitans* is that it concentrates on contemporary debates on subjectivity, and fails to engage with the theological origins of the Cartesian

¹⁵⁷ See especially sections 1.a and 1.b above

¹⁵⁸ See Nagel, *View*, 74-82.

¹⁵⁹ Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism* 47-52 and her discussion in chapter 3. 'Historians of philosophy have perhaps been over anxious to seal off hermetically the Cartesian self...[and] deny that the modern notion of consciousness has recognisable analogues in ancient epistemologies' 48. She says his 'pragmatic appeal to the subjective states' is 'one that Descartes shares with a far more ancient tradition involving therapy of the soul. 'For although the introspective stance features heavily in Cartesian epistemology, in fact the "retreat within" as a philosophical construct precedes Descartes and is perhaps most readily visible in a whole genre of literature that no doubt inspired Descartes with its emphasis on subjective psychology' 48-49. See note 119 below.

¹⁶⁰ See Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, especially 88-90.

subject.¹⁶¹ Rappe points out that modern criticism of the Cartesian subject as a divinised cognitive self with the attributes of a creator God¹⁶² ignores its origins in Augustinian and mediaeval conceptions, with their introspective focus. For Rappe the introspective stance of Cartesian epistemology owes much of its origins to the idea of the ‘retreat within’, a principle that can be traced back through a genre of literature that stresses subjective psychology, from the *Confessions*, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius to the Stoic *meditatio*.¹⁶³ So contemporary debates on subjectivism, according to Rappe, miss the importance of the contribution of this tradition to Cartesian rationalism; moreover it is in this introspective tradition that we can find parallels with Nagel’s claim that by looking *within* we can open up the scope of reason.

In *Reading Neoplatonism* Rappe attempts a dialogue between current philosophers, with their subjectivist focus, and the thought of Plotinus and subsequent Neoplatonists.¹⁶⁴ She makes clear, however, that Plotinus was not a subjectivist in any modern sense.¹⁶⁵ And to read Plotinus with an Hegelian idealist bias would also be wrong, as for Plotinus ‘the structure known by the intellect is emphatically not an invention of the individual mind, but becomes available to the individual only when she has succeeded in putting aside her particular point of view, or more accurately when she has succeeded in increasing her point of view.’¹⁶⁶ Plotinian non-discursive thinking is ‘a form of knowledge that asks the individual soul to step outside of its own constrictions and its own contents’.¹⁶⁷

For Plotinus and the Neoplatonists there exists a faculty of mind that incorrigibly grasps eternal truths and such intellectual intuition has self-presence and

¹⁶¹ See Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, 47-52. ‘The Cartesian mental self [...] has become a veritable *pharmakos* on whom is foisted every fallacy of the modern age and has been almost ritually exorcised from the pages of our texts. *Reading Neoplatonism*, 48.

¹⁶² i.e. a divinised cognitive self which ‘borrows’ from the attributes of a creationist God.

¹⁶³ Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, 49.

¹⁶⁴ See Rappe on Plotinus’ critique of subjectivism, in *Reading Neoplatonism*, especially 45-66.

¹⁶⁵ See Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, chapter 3, especially p. 51. Rappe argues that it is more appropriate to describe the Neoplatonic approach, based on the thought of Plotinus, as introspective rather than subjective, introspection being a tradition not unconnected with modern subjectivism but not to be confused with it.

¹⁶⁶ As Rappe explains, Plotinus was trying to encourage an expanded centre of consciousness that goes beyond individual identity: ‘[the] detachment from the narrow confines of historical selfhood, while it does not consist in a denial of the empirical self, allows the larger selfhood of the soul to emerge from behind the veil of the objective domain.’ Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, 85.

¹⁶⁷ Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, 46.

immediacy.¹⁶⁸ Knowing that one knows is, says Rappe, the foundation for all truth and there can be no knowledge of reality without self-reflection.¹⁶⁹ Self-knowledge is a different activity than perception, it is an activity directed towards nothing. Unlike the phenomenological view of modern subjectivism in Husserl, the intellect is not directed towards any intentional state, and in contrast to the inter-subjective world of discursive thought, in non-discursive thought the mind is self-enclosed.¹⁷⁰ Self-reflection then is not subjectivity or self-consciousness in any modern sense. In the famous dreaming analogy of Plotinus I discover myself as a dreamer by turning away from discursive thought, and it is through this true self awareness that I awake. Rappe explains the significant difference in the development of introspection that resulted from Descartes' adoption of the introspective method. For, while the focus of introspection for Neoplatonic thinkers was to develop an explanation of *a transcendent faculty of awareness*, Descartes took this introspective focus in a different direction, namely that of a *substantive subjectivity*.¹⁷¹ Rappe believes that when Descartes made self-transparency the hallmark of what is distinctive in the mental, he 'muddled the ancient category of criterion of truth with his newly deployed method of introspection'.¹⁷² Rappe concludes that for Plotinus, subjective certainty was an ultimate, not a beginning. So we can see that Nagel, in his repudiation of certainty as the ultimate truth criterion,¹⁷³ appears to be closer to Plotinus than to Descartes. I would suggest that his assertion of the overriding importance of the self's objective capacity can be read as a continuation of the tradition of Neoplatonist rationalism, rather than the Cartesian re-establishment of rationalism.

It is not just in this area that Nagel's rationalism seems very close to Plotinus. When Nagel says that 'the basis of real knowledge must be a priori and drawn from within

¹⁶⁸ Rappe Introduction p xv

¹⁶⁹ Rappe 27

¹⁷⁰ Rappe 57

¹⁷¹ Despite making the *cogito* contentless.

¹⁷² See note 107 above and chapter 3 of *Reading Neoplatonism*, Rappe draws on the examples of the Stoic 'Meditation' and the confessional epistle, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca's 'Letter to Lucilius'. She sees Augustine's *Confessions* as a Christian version of the Stoic meditation. She also shows how inner meditation in the Greek tradition is an attempt to control inner discourse and make sense of it (see especially pp. 49-51).

¹⁷³ And his alternative emphasis on universality, See discussion in section 1.c above.

ourselves', ¹⁷⁴ he is echoing Neoplatonic thinkers such as Plotinus, who presume that the mind has 'a faculty that incorrigibly grasps eternal truth'. ¹⁷⁵ In his emphasis on the significant role of the a priori in human knowing, Nagel is going beyond a mere claim for introspection as a method – he is asserting a relation between mind and reality. ¹⁷⁶ Nagel assumes that a priori thinking can lead beyond the limits of the inter-subjective and take us into an objective realm.

Another area of thought where similar assumptions are made by both Nagel and Plotinus is in the role of language within epistemology. Both Nagel and Plotinus argue for a primacy of logic over language in epistemology that contrasts with some prevailing contemporary theoretical emphases. ¹⁷⁷ It is important for Nagel that language, as a cultural product, is not seen as a source of logic, for this leads to a relativist psychologism that devalues reason. ¹⁷⁸ For both Nagel and Plotinus, reason is pre-verbal and pre-cultural. ¹⁷⁹

We can, then, summarise the historical and theoretical connections we have established between Nagel and Plotinus by contrasting them with key traditions in modern philosophy. Firstly, the starting point of introspection is in contrast to both empiricism and Kantian, or neo-Kantian, transcendental idealism. Secondly, the repudiation of certainty as the ultimate criterion of truth is in contrast with the tradition of modern subjectivism developed after Descartes. And thirdly, in the primacy given to the a priori in Nagel's epistemology we see an ambition for the

¹⁷⁴ Nagel, *View*, 83.

¹⁷⁵ Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, Preface.

¹⁷⁶ See the discussion on the role of the a priori for Nagel's epistemology of objectivity in section 1.a above.

¹⁷⁷ In the Neoplatonic tradition language is unable to represent truth in a satisfactory way, which is why, as we saw in chapter 2, the Neoplatonic tradition gave a primacy to signs, symbols and mathematical concepts which were perceived as closer to the truth than words. The engagement with text, with ritual, is a path to be followed that can take us beyond *all* representations. For Nagel it is the primacy of thought itself that leads to a questioning of the place of language in the aspiration towards truth. Grammar follows logic in his system, not the other way round, See Nagel, *Last Word*, 39.

¹⁷⁸ 'One factor that has contributed to the devaluing of reason is a misconception of the importance of language for philosophy. Since languages are human practises, cultural products that differ from one another and have complex histories, the idea that the deepest level of analysis of our knowledge, thought, and understanding must be through the analysis of language has gradually given rise to a psychologism about what is most fundamental, which in turn often leads to relativism.' Nagel, *Last Word*, 37.

¹⁷⁹ For Nagel, see *View*, 11, and also *Last Word*, 65, where he says: 'Thought has priority over description because description necessarily involves thought.' For the Neoplatonists, truth was a 'state unlike normal thinking' (Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, 27) – something better expressed through symbol or ritual.

scope and depth of reason which contrasts with the closed epistemologies of much Hegelian idealism.

2.b The view from nowhere and objectiveless awareness

As Louis Dupré has observed, the ‘dynamic view of a potentially unlimited mind’ – the idea within the mystical tradition that there is a self beyond consciousness – is not taken seriously by analytical philosophy.¹⁸⁰ But the conception of objectless awareness in Plotinian thought forms the philosophical basis for the concept of contemplation in Dionysian apophatic spirituality, and it presumes perception beyond self-consciousness and a principle of intellectual intuition. Whilst Nagel, like most modern philosophers, will not claim that there is a self beyond consciousness in this mystical form, he does maintain that there is a capacity and impetus of the objective self to aspire to a view from nowhere. In this section I will discuss the similarities and dissimilarities of the Nagel’s understanding of this capacity and impetus of the objective self with the Plotinian concept of objectiveless awareness.

As we have seen in chapter 2, objectless awareness in Plotinian thought is the result of a practice of turning away from the objects of perception to seek reality within.¹⁸¹ In this practice the intellect has no intentionality, and it is precisely the subject’s lack of intentional object or state that distinguishes the Plotinian self from the phenomenological modern subjectivist self.¹⁸² Indeed, so far removed is the concept

¹⁸⁰ See Louis Dupré, ‘The mystical experience of the self’, and the brief discussion of this in my introduction. Neither, Dupré continues, does philosophy take the ‘direct, though negative knowledge’ of this ‘ultimate selfhood’ seriously. This direct knowledge arises from what Sara Rappe has described as an unproblematic access to non-discursive truth (an epistemological claim which she also points out is eschewed by most modern philosophers): ‘Plotinus’s dialectic between epistemology and ontology plays upon the inadequacy of discursive thinking whilst simultaneously insisting that the truth is unproblematically available to human knowers.’ Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, 27.

¹⁸¹ See chapter 2, section 1.b.on mystical realism.

¹⁸² See Emilsson, *Plotinus on Sense-Perception*, where he discusses the difference between Plotinus’ contrast between the image of a thing and the thing in itself as not being the same as a phenomenological distinction between an external object and our perception of it. Emilsson argues that ‘the contrast between the image and the thing itself in [*Enneads*] V.1.5 is a contrast between the superficial features of things grasped by perception and their internal nature and not a contrast between the subjective and the objective.’ Emilsson, *Plotinus on Sense-Perception*, 121. All the above is key to the debate about whether Plotinus is a realist or an anti-realist. Plotinian scholarly opinion is divided, with Emilsson and Clark arguing realism, and Zeller and Blumenthal for an anti-realist

of objectless awareness from our modern epistemology that this lack of intentionality calls into question objectless awareness as an *experience* at all.¹⁸³ It is *energia*, an activity directed towards nothing, hence literally an ‘objectless awareness’.¹⁸⁴

Nagel’s idea of the view from nowhere is both similar and dissimilar to this objectless awareness. A key difference is that Nagel does not deliberately shun the objects of perception, rather he aims for an objective conception of reality, one that includes our thoughts and perceptions but is not tied exclusively to our point of view.¹⁸⁵ In his imagining of the centreless world we inhabit we have to include other minds, their experiences and their perspectives, and therefore we have to take into account what we cannot possibly experience. Nagel does not argue that we forgo empirical perception, rather that this should be ordered to achieve a view from nowhere, a view that must acknowledge the significance of that which we cannot perceive.

Nagel’s idea of objectivity further differs from Plotinian objectless awareness in that his concept of abstraction does not involve the direct negation of subjectivity. Indeed, Nagel suggests a kind of dualism of the objective and the individual self. He goes as far as to describe the development of the objective self as semi-autonomous from the individual.¹⁸⁶ However, there is a trajectory in Nagel’s thought that does imply a role for self-negation, as necessary for all ethical and political thinking. I shall be discussing this in chapter 6, when I compare Nagel’s understanding of self-transcendence with that of Meister Eckhart.

Nagel views our capacity to think objectively about the perspective of a particular person inside the world *alongside an objective view* of that same world, the person and his/her viewpoint included as ambition for transcendence in full recognition of our *contingent position* in the world. Nagel explains this as a ‘double vision’. This has some similarities with the Plotinian doctrine of the ‘double status’ of

interpretation. Emilsson bases his realist position on his interpretation of both *Enneads* V.1.5 and I.1.7. See Emilsson, *Plotinus on Sense-Perception*, 113-21.

¹⁸³ This lack of intentionality raises real questions about the nature of mystical ‘experience’, as I discussed in my evaluation of Bernard McGinn’s modest proposal in chapter 1 section 2.c.

¹⁸⁴ *Energia* in its pure form is activity directed towards nothing.

¹⁸⁵ See section 1.a above, and chapter 2 of Nagel, *View*.

¹⁸⁶ Nagel *View*, 65-66

transcendence and immanence,¹⁸⁷ but with an important difference. Both Nagel and Plotinus would agree that as human beings we have an objective view and a subjective perspective, but for Plotinus this is because of our existence at different levels of reality, whilst for Nagel this ‘double vision’ is a co-existence (and a tension) within the individual in the here and now.¹⁸⁸

Nagel maintains that we can acknowledge this tension and not limit our understanding. Indeed he suggests that this ‘double vision’ is what gives us insight into our wider context as beings within a ‘centreless world’. In his chapter on the objective self in *The View from Nowhere* he muses on the sense of ‘amazement’ which is part of the philosophical enterprise, something he identifies as a ‘strange sense that I both am and am not the hub of the universe [...] I am both the logical focus of an objective conception of the world and a particular being in that world who occupies no central position whatever.’¹⁸⁹ Perhaps in a different time and place he would say: ‘for my sake the world was created’ and ‘I am earth and ashes.’¹⁹⁰

2.c Realism and the claims of human reason

The impetus for objectivity in Nagel’s epistemology has, as we have seen, an incompleteness. This is a key characteristic of Nagel’s epistemology which allows it to be open to constant revision and the progressive advancement of human knowledge. In short, *because* of his positive engagement with the unknown in his epistemology Nagel can extend the scope and depth of human reason. In his acknowledgement of the unknown and his integration of this within his epistemology, Nagel echoes themes of ‘mystical realism’ in Plotinus that we explored in chapter 2.

¹⁸⁷ See chapter two section 1.d, on transcendence and immanence, and the discussion of d’Ancona Costa’s article.

¹⁸⁸ See Nagel’s discussion of ‘double vision’ in *View*, chapter 5.6

¹⁸⁹ Nagel, *View*, 64.

¹⁹⁰ Compare this with the following: ‘Rabbi Bunham said to his disciples: Everyone must have two pockets, so that he can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In the right pocket are to be the words: “For my sake the world was created” and in his left “I am earth and ashes”.’ Quoted by Dorothee Soelle in *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara Rumscheidt and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2001), herself quoting Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: Later Masters* (New York: Stocken, 1948) 246-50.

As we have seen above, Nagel's concept of the objective self is the end result of countless abstractions from empirical circumstances which allows us to 'escape' from the contingencies of the empirical self.¹⁹¹ But this escape is not in itself a denial of our contingency, but rather an 'ambition for transcendence' that exists 'in full recognition of our contingent position in the world'.¹⁹² For Nagel it is the content of our "objective thoughts" that provide the impetus for our escape from the contingencies of our subjective perspective and they are necessary for us to place ourselves in the world both mentally and physically.¹⁹³ Our desires to order our relation to the world are valid in themselves and cannot all be explained away as a psychological projection.¹⁹⁴

The scientific knowledge and the understanding of the laws of nature we obtain by empirical evidence are, according to Nagel, 'driven by the broader idea that our local experiences and observations and the regularities we detect in them are manifestations of something else, something that includes us but on which none of us has a privileged perspective.'¹⁹⁵ The most plausible explanation of the systematic correlation of our observed regularities is not that these are 'artefacts of our perspective on the world' but rather that they are 'products of the world's systematic interaction with us'.¹⁹⁶ Nagel asserts that logical and mathematical thoughts and also practical, that is moral, reasoning are also in the category of objective thoughts.¹⁹⁷

I will argue below that restricting political and ethical theorising to the inter-subjective of the historical, local and contingent, as certain pragmatists and deconstructionists do, prohibits a realism of value on which to ground ethical universalism.¹⁹⁸ As we have seen above, Rorty's explicit rejection of the goal of

¹⁹¹ 'What really happens in the pursuit of objectivity is that a certain element of oneself, the impersonal or objective self, which can escape from the specific contingencies of one's creaturely point of view, is allowed to predominate.' Nagel, *View*, 9.

¹⁹² Nagel, *View*, 9.

¹⁹³ Nagel, *Last Word*, 85 and 133-40.

¹⁹⁴ Nagel, *Last Word*, 91.

¹⁹⁵ Nagel, *Last Word* 84.

¹⁹⁶ Nagel, *Last Word*, 90. The relationship between human consciousness and the cosmological order is also addressed in *Mind and Cosmos*.

¹⁹⁷ See Nagel, *Last Word*, 20.

¹⁹⁸ See the discussion in section 1.b above of Rorty's neo-pragmatism, and the consideration of deconstructionism at the end of chapter 2.

objective cognition, and his prioritisation instead of aesthetic advancement, lends his neo-pragmatist idea of moral progress a different complexion from that of Nagel, though they share similar progressive liberal democratic political views.¹⁹⁹ In chapter 4 below I shall show why the search for objectivity is key to practical reasoning, and how important the open-ended nature of Nagel's objectivist epistemology is for the development of his model of egalitarian politics. For the grounding of the search for objective values in a universal perspective allows for the development of empathy across local, cultural and historical boundaries, in direct opposition to the acceptance of the ethnocentrism we see in Rorty's ethics.²⁰⁰ Like Norman Geras, who identifies the trans-cultural motivations for the 'righteous among the nations' (those who rescued victims of the Holocaust), Nagel believes it is essential to move beyond the *sympathies* of the inter-subjective to develop our *empathy* based on a 'view from nowhere', if we are to challenge social injustice and inequality.²⁰¹

Summary

In this chapter we have identified shared epistemological assumptions in the rationalism of Thomas Nagel and the Plotinian strain of Neoplatonism. The parallels between Nagel's epistemology and the epistemology of Plotinus show that the Plotinian concepts we find in the Dionysian apophatic tradition continue to have validity in modern rationalist epistemology. This ongoing validity is evidence, I would suggest, of the thoroughgoing commitment to reason we find in the intellectual stream of the Dionysian apophatic tradition.

The rationalist approach is, in popular thought, counter-posed to the claims of faith. Yet the similarities between Nagel's epistemology and the Plotinian epistemology that underlies apophatic mysticism challenge this false assumption. As we have seen,

¹⁹⁹ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 13. Rorty believes we should be content to accept that philosophy's role is one of 'edification', based on the books one reads and discusses rather than the problems one wishes to solve. He echoes the position of John Dewey in his prioritising of aesthetic advancement: see chapter 8 of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, especially p. 394. In this edification art and literature are seen as important, but (a certain conception of) poetry is given pride of place.

²⁰⁰ I shall discuss further how Nagel's ethical universalism forms the basis for his political theory in chapter 5 below.

²⁰¹ Norman Geras points out the limitations of an ethical theory built on intersubjectivity, i.e. on an expanded conception of sympathies alone. See Norman Geras, *Solidarity*, especially Geras' discussion in chapter 1 of this work on the motivations of 'the righteous among the nations'.

there are significant historical and theoretical connections between rationalism and the Christian apophatic tradition. Moreover, the areas of common ground between rationalism and Dionysian apophatic mysticism we have identified in this chapter straddle contemporary philosophical and theological classifications.

The theoretical connections we have considered in this chapter contrast with both cultural relativism and the dogmatism of much contemporary secular thought. In the next chapter, where I shall continue to explore the dialogue between apophaticism and Nagel's rationalism, I shall move on to the area of morality. In making links between human reason and human action, we will see possibilities of shared assumptions relevant for social and political theory. It is on this basis that I will argue later in this thesis that apophaticism can provide grounds for a rational and politically egalitarian view of Christian engagement with the world.

Chapter 4

Reason And Ethics: Our Participation In Truth

In the previous chapter I highlighted the similarities between Nagel's modern-day rationalism and aspects of the Dionysian intellectual tradition. In this chapter I will concentrate on the ethical implications of Nagel's rationalist realism, in preparation for my comparison in the last chapters of this thesis of the ethics of the Dionysian apophatic tradition with Nagel's moral and political theory. In this context I shall highlight the second significant meta-level assumption¹ in Nagel's epistemology of objectivity – his participatory model of truth.

Nagel sees a necessary connection between rationality and human action which means that, through practical reasoning, we are all able to 'live in part of the truth'. Indeed, the more we place our individual thoughts under the 'control' of a universal standard the closer we are to the truth:

[T]he outer boundaries of our understanding will always be reached in unqualified, objective reasoning about the real world rather than in the interpretation and expression of our own perspective – personal or social. To engage in such reasoning is to try to bring one's individual thoughts under the control of a universal standard that prescribes to each person those beliefs, available from his point of view, which can form part of a consistent set of objective beliefs dispersed over all rational persons. It enables us to all live in part of the truth.²

In the first part of this chapter I will examine the general philosophical context of Nagel's objectivist ethics and highlight key characteristics, namely its objectivism and teleology, and how, in line with his epistemology, Nagel eschews a subjectivist or relativist concept of truth. Secondly I shall explore Nagel's use of the principle of the 'impersonal standpoint' in his ethical theory, before going on to identify certain

¹ The first meta-level assumption, that introspection is the starting point of reasoning, having been discussed in chapter 3.

² Nagel, *Last Word*, 76.

tensions between the impersonal and personal standpoints that arise from Nagel's objectivism in ethics and politics.

1. Objectivity, Ethical Motivation and Teleology in Nagel

The desire for objectivity and the adoption of an impersonal stance in moral and political thought has often been misconceived as abstract, disregarding empirical facts about the diversity of human nature or the complexity of our 'inner life'.³ Yet for Nagel, the impetus to pursue objectivity and (as we will see below in part 2 of this chapter) allocate value to an *impersonal* standpoint is that this is essential in order for us to act ethically. There is indeed a valid case to be made that rather than being a distraction from the realities of human life, adopting an impersonal standpoint allows us to ground our reasons for action in our understanding of the objective facts of human experiences such as the existence of poverty and suffering, or indeed discrimination and denial of aspiration.⁴ It is through *detachment from our own perspective* that we are intimately affected by the claims of others.

In my discussion of Nagel's epistemology in chapter 3 I described the process of abstraction whereby we have the capacity to view things objectively as well as seeing things from our own subjective view. Such a capacity, Nagel says, shows that 'something essential about me has nothing to do with my perspective and position in the world.'⁵ This possibility of self-transcendence is equally important to Nagel's moral theory. For Nagel the subject matter of ethics is precisely this, 'how to engage in practical reasoning and the justification of action once we have expanded our consciousness by occupying the objective standpoint'.⁶

³ Nagel's thought has been at the cutting edge of 'culture wars' with those who reject moral objectivism.

⁴ Nagel considers all of this in *Equality and Partiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), especially chapter 10, 'Equality and Motivation'.

⁵ Nagel, *View*, 60.

⁶ 'The subject matter of ethics *is* how to engage in practical reasoning and the justification of action once we expand our consciousness by occupying the objective standpoint- not something else about action which the objective standpoint enables us to understand better.' Nagel, *View*, 139 (Nagel's emphasis).

In the first part of this chapter I will explain how the epistemological aspiration for objectivity is followed through in Nagel's ethical theory as the aspiration for objectivity in values, reasons and motives. In the first section I shall explore the relationship between his realism about values and his ethical objectivism. I shall then show how his objectivism is based on the rationalist presumption that reasoning is itself the source of moral authority, and how this leads on to his rationalist theory of ethical motivation. I shall end by drawing out the teleological nature of his ethics and relating this to his meta-level assumption that truth is participatory.

1.a Objectivity and realism in practical reasoning

Nagel's realism, and its significance for his rationalism, is the starting point of my discussion of his objectivist ethics. His realism in epistemology, i.e. the acceptance that the world exists independently of my perception of it, is reflected in his ethics. He holds that by adopting an objective view we can recognise universal values and reasons independent of our own perspective. The lure of philosophical idealism – that in some way we create our own reality – contrasts starkly with Nagel's aspiration for objective knowledge of a reality independent of our subjective perspective. Further, he rejects the scepticism about values maintained in theories such as emotivism, and this represents a continuation of his position against metaphysical scepticism. However, as I shall make clear below, there are differences between his philosophical realism and his realism about value.⁷

Nagel's ethical realism is based upon two main epistemological presumptions, which he perceives as central and unavoidable: firstly, the assumption that other people really exist, and secondly that I have the capacity to see myself as just another person.⁸ I shall show in my discussion below how important these two assumptions are to his concept of the 'impersonal standpoint', which itself is key to the

⁷ See his discussion of the arguments for and against scepticism in chapter 5 of *The View from Nowhere*, especially parts 1 ('Scepticism') and 2 ('Antiscepticism'). Nagel himself makes the link between philosophical realism and objectivist ethics, noting that 'philosophical scepticism and idealism about values are more popular than their metaphysical counterparts' Nagel, *View*, 154.

⁸ For the assertion of these basic assumptions, the 'recognition of the reality of other persons' and our 'capacity to regard oneself as one amongst many', see Nagel, *Altruism*, 3.

development of his ethics and the political concept of impartiality.⁹ At present, however, I shall note that these realist assumptions are what give Nagel's ethical theory a *universal* and *egalitarian* character.

Consideration of Nagel's epistemological realism, together with his rationalism, leads to the identification of another important feature of his ethical theory – the recognition that that practical reasoning, like all reasoning, will be incomplete. As we have seen in chapter 3, Nagel eschews certainty as the ultimate criterion of truth, and rejects the necessity of building his rationalist theory on a closed set of self-evident foundational truths.¹⁰ For Nagel, rationality is the only certainty, both epistemologically and ethically, and this is reflected in his view that reasoning itself is the source of moral authority.¹¹

Nagel applies strictly rational criteria to both epistemology and ethics. He asserts at the beginning of *The Possibility of Altruism* that 'just as there are rational requirements on thought, there are rational requirements on action.'¹² There is, however, an important difference between his approaches to reasoning about epistemology and reasoning about ethics. This difference concerns how we discover the limits of value, and the limits of logic.¹³ For Nagel contends that for the objectivist approach, reasoning about empirical facts represents a different set of problems to reasoning about value.¹⁴

⁹ See section 2.a below.

¹⁰ This is the parallel of the incompleteness of the search for objective knowledge; see the discussion in sections 1.a and section 1.c of Chapter 3, and further discussion of this issue in section 1.e. of this chapter, on teleology.

¹¹ I shall discuss this further in the next section.

¹² Nagel, *Altruism*, 3.

¹³ The importance of the distinction between practical and theoretical reasoning in the Aristotelian, Thomist and Kantian traditions has been explained by Paul Janz in *The Command of Grace: A New Theological Apologetics* (London: Continuum, 2009). As Janz points out, practical reasoning has the same rational character as theoretical reasoning and is equally subject to limits, but these limits concern requirements for *action* (see especially pp. 78-84). Practical reasoning, then, is subject to its own limits analogous to, but not reducible to, logical limits. Without an acknowledgement of this, human wants and desires are conceived as simply intellectual categories and morality becomes focused on purely cognitive questions. Nagel himself says '[t]he major dis-analogy between theoretical and practical reasoning, of course, is that the premises of a deductive argument entail its conclusion, even though the belief of the one does not entail the belief of the other. Nothing like this is true in the practical case. Nagel, *Altruism*, 21. Nagel goes on to suggest that both Quine and Wittgenstein reject the distinction. Both Janz and Nagel seek to develop a realist ethics focused on our requirement to act in the world.

¹⁴ Nagel, *View*, 138.

In our practical reasoning we do not have to make sure that our thoughts accord with any external reality, for values do not exist as external reality does.¹⁵ Whilst practical reasoning does indeed involve the development of a comprehensive viewpoint through detachment and the inclusion of former perspectives, as we have also seen in Nagel's epistemological model, in the case of practical reasoning what we arrive at will be not a new set of beliefs, but a new set of values.¹⁶

Propositions about what gives us reasons for action can be true or false independently of how things appear to us, and [...] we can hope to discover the truth by transcending the appearances and subjecting them to critical assessment. What we aim to discover by this method is not a new aspect of the external world, called value, but rather just the truth about what we and others should do and want.¹⁷

Realism about values leads us to focus on our action in the world. The world exists independently of us and objective reasoning about it motivates us to meet moral demands.

Having seen in this section how important realism is to Nagel's understanding of ethics, I shall now address myself to the central place Nagel gives rationality in his moral theory.

1.b Objectivity, rationality and the source of moral authority

For Nagel the question 'Why should I be moral?' is ultimately unanswerable. If we want to understand our moral motivation we have to consider how ethical principles govern us. For Nagel practical reasoning, like all reasoning, must be objective and have a universal application. The source of moral

¹⁵ Nagel, *View*, 139. Nagel makes this point explicitly by distinguishing his realism from the metaphysics of Platonism.

¹⁶ Nagel, *View*, 138.

¹⁷ Nagel, *View*, 139.

authority is in the ‘patterns and influences which are universal’ and the a priori reasoning that results from these.¹⁸

This a priori reasoning has universal authority but ‘is something each individual can find within himself’.¹⁹ The boundaries of moral reasoning, like the limits of logical thought, are not decided by me – I find them by discovering them. I accept an authority which is found within me, as in all other human beings, but is not from me. The universal authority of the objective viewpoint, then is, through practical reasoning, accessible to all.²⁰

Significant features of Nagel’s understanding of practical reasoning follow closely his emphasis on objectivity in epistemology. In line with his epistemological model of a ‘centreless world’,²¹ he says we have to accept that the world of reasons, including my reasons for action, does not exist only from my point of view. We have to accept that our subjective viewpoint, though ours and ours only, is not ‘cosmically unique’.²² In order to act ethically I have to transcend my own particular viewpoint to reach a viewpoint where my own interests are just one set of interests amongst others.²³

Nagel’s ethical objective standpoint thus mirrors his epistemological ‘view from nowhere’. In both I can transcend my own perspective by forming an objective view of the real world. To be the ‘viewers of the world from nowhere within it’, we have to reject subjective appearances to form a new set of values, reasons and motives. This is not a ‘false objectivity’ of elevating personal taste to value, but a realism about value which we develop from a *detached* point of view. Practical reasoning is, for Nagel, a matter of being objective and

¹⁸ Nagel, *Altruism*, 90 “The principle behind altruism is that values must be objective, and that any which appear subjective must be associated with others that are not” See also his Tanner lecture ‘The Limits of Objectivity’, 96, where he makes the point that looked at from the objective side of the object/subject divide it is subjectivity that is problematic. Sterling McMurrin, ed. *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁹ Nagel, *Last Word*, 3.

²⁰ Logic is a category of thought from which there is no appeal beyond itself *Last Word*, 3 See also chapter 2.

²¹ As discussed in chapter 3 above.

²² Nagel, *Last Word*, 120.

²³ Nagel, *View*, 140.

disinterested, and we will further explore the significance of this in his ethical theory when we discuss his concept of the ‘impersonal standpoint’ below.²⁴

The ability to see ourselves objectively is tied into the fact of subjectivity, i.e. different perspectives do exist. For Nagel it is because there are different subjective perspectives that we aspire to an objective view, and this is for two mutually implicatory reasons. Firstly we need to reach agreement from our different perspectives in order to coexist (we would not need to seek ‘agreement’ if we were all the same, and wanted the same, as we would already have a shared perspective). But once such an agreement on an intersubjective level is achieved we are led beyond it. For Nagel, intersubjective agreements are only a ‘first stage’, a limited objectivity, that will *inevitably* lead to the universal, as he explains:²⁵

The concept of subjectivity always demands an objective framework, within which the subject is located and his special perspective or set of responses described. We cannot leave the standpoint of justification completely, and it drives us to seek objective grounds [...] the serious attempt to identify what is subjective and particular, or relative and communal in one’s own outlook leads inevitably to the objective and universal.²⁶

The first stage of intersubjectivity leads us on to the second stage because the comparisons of the different perspectives themselves allow us to identify what is relative in our outlook and what is not. So in Nagel’s centreless world, the motivation to transcend our individual viewpoint is the result of our reasoning from the subjectivity of different perspectives, but becomes inevitable once intersubjective agreement is reached. Our ethical motivation is the result of ‘our practical reasoning (which) requires detachment from particular perspectives and transcendence of one’s time and place.’

²⁴ He stresses the issue of the objective and ‘disinterested’ nature of ethics in *The Tanner Lectures*, 97-99.

²⁵ ‘The idea of objectivity always points beyond mere intersubjective agreement, even though such agreement, criticism, and justification are essential methods of reaching an objective view. Nagel, *View*, 108; see also p. 63. In Nagel’s view, we need to move on from this first stage to the ‘cultivation’ of a universal objective self.

²⁶ Nagel, *Last Word*, 16. See also the preface to McMurrin, *Tanner Lectures*.

In chapter 3 we saw that in the pursuit of an objective understanding of reality, it is necessary for us to expand our knowledge of what there is beyond the way it appears to us.²⁷ In the next section I shall explain further how Nagel's objectivist ethics, though internally focused, avoids the limitations of moral relativism by considering ethical motivation as something that results from an objective reasoning that takes into account our own subjective perspective, but also the perspectives of others. In the pursuit of objectivity in practical reasoning we reach beyond what is subjective and relative.²⁸

1.c Objectivity, rationality and internalism

Rational introspection is the starting point of Nagel's moral thinking, as it is of his epistemology.²⁹ But this internal focus should not be confused with internalism in ethical theory, which leads to subjectivism or relativism. The universal authority we 'find within', according to Nagel, is both *internal* and *objective*.

In *The Last Word* Nagel makes clear the difference between his internalist objectivism and the internalism of other ethical approaches. In his view, internalism, whether in the Humean mould or in more contemporary forms that appeal to language or 'psychologism', is not tenable as grounds for ethics because it is ultimately reductionist.³⁰ This reductionism is defined by Nagel as explaining *away* the normative in terms of subjective desires.³¹ Instead, his ethical approach is based on the assumption I have discussed above, that practical reasoning is itself the source of moral authority – an assumption that connects rationality with objectivity.

²⁷ Nagel, *View*, 26; see also the discussion in section 1.a of Chapter 3 above.

²⁸ It is our capacity for detachment and self-transcendence that allows us to do this, and 'if we did not have this capacity then there would be no alternative to relativism in ethics.' Nagel, *View*, 186-87,

²⁹ Introspection being the starting point of knowledge for Nagel, as noted in chapter 3.

³⁰ Nagel, *Last Word*, chapter 3, 37.

³¹ In Nagel's view, reductionist approaches to ethics are typified by Hume; see *View*, 142. See also his discussion of Hume in *Last Word*, chapter 3.

Notwithstanding the connection Nagel makes between rationality and objectivity, he accepts the validity of subjective perspectives, and I will elaborate further below on how he integrates subjective perspectives with his objectivist ethics.³² The salient point in this discussion is that he sees our own perspective as significant in our understanding of moral behaviour, but he believes we cannot ground our *ethical practice* in subjective values, reasons or motives.

It is also important to note that Nagel's objectivist approach does not lead him to attempt any ethical justification based on an overarching concept of human nature, whether as intrinsically orientated to the common good or as intrinsically self-regarding. He makes this clear in his influential book *The Possibility of Altruism*, where although he maintains that there is 'something basic to human nature' that makes altruism, indeed all morality, possible, he makes clear (and this point is emphasised on the very last page) that this contention should not be confused with a simple argument for the basic goodness of human beings.³³ So Nagel rejects ethical naturalism and other attempts to ground ethics in human nature, and rejects any ideas of natural goodness or indeed egoism as motivating factors for ethical behaviour.³⁴

To summarise, Nagel sees moral reasoning as having authority not because of any aspect of our human nature or our subjective interests, but because of its nature as practical reasoning itself. Further, Nagel sees agreement on an intersubjective level as insufficient to form a rational basis for ethical action.³⁵ It is rather our aspiration toward objectivity in values, reasons and motives that

³² See my discussion on impartiality and partiality in section 2.c below.

³³ On the final page of *The Possibility of Altruism* Nagel makes this clear: 'To say that altruism and morality are possible in virtue of something basic to human nature is not to say that men [*sic*] are basically good.' Nagel, *Altruism*, 146.

³⁴ Nagel is not an ethical naturalist but he does say: 'In so far as rational requirements, practical or theoretical, represent conditions on belief and action, such necessity as may attach to them is not logical but natural or psychological. It is therefore necessary to inquire how they achieve their hold on us. Perhaps the most we can hope is that such principles should apply to us in virtue of particularly deep features of our make up, features we cannot alter. That is what I hope to establish with regard to certain requirements of practical reason [...]' Nagel, *Altruism*, 22.

³⁵ For example, he explicitly rejects any attempts to base morality on 'agreements in judgement and usage by members of a community' (Nagel, *Last Word*, 69). This is a comment not just on political communitarianism but on philosophers such as Rorty who would wish to ground their ethics in the pragmatism of common language.

connects reason with morality. I shall now consider Nagel's concept of ethical motivation in the light of the importance of rationality and the internalisation of objectivity that I have discussed above.

1.d Objectivity, rationality and ethical motivation

For Nagel the motivating factor in moral reasoning is the 'truth of ethical statements themselves'.³⁶ What he means by this becomes clearer when we consider his concept of ethical motivation in the light of his commitment to rational objectivity:

Ethical thought is the process of bringing objectivity to bear on the will, and the only possible thing I can think of to say about ethical truth in general, is that it must be a possible result of this process, correctly carried out. I recognise this is empty [...] perhaps a richer metaphysics of morals could be devised, but I don't know what it could be.³⁷

The content of moral reasoning is of course 'desires, intentions, and actions, or feelings and convictions that can motivate desire, intention, and action', but Nagel maintains that 'the question whether one should have a certain desire or the question whether, given one has that desire, one should act on it, is always open to rational consideration.'³⁸ The objective view will include all aspects of human behaviour but in order to act ethically my desires must be grounded in and guided by reason.³⁹ I can aspire to a more moral life but this is an aspiration towards 'a new motivational condition at a higher level of objectivity' rather than an aspiration towards something

³⁶ Nagel, *Altruism*, 7.

³⁷ Nagel, *View*, 139.

³⁸ For Nagel altruism is rational, not a feeling. This does not mean that he excludes the role of desires (i.e. sensible desires): see *Altruism*, 3-4. Indeed, 'it is a mystery how one could account for the motivational source of ethical action without referring to desires.' Nagel, *Last Word*, 103. See also his defence of the use of the word 'reasons', on the grounds that it is in common use to refer to both an explanation and a justification for action (*Altruism*, 14-15). That normative principles are part of a motivational structure is, he states, 'neither arbitrary nor accidental'. The process of our practical reasoning *itself* is both explanation and justification.

³⁹ This 'emptiness', then, arises not because Nagel excludes any aspect of human emotion or belief, but rather because he holds that 'the truth about how we should live could [not] extend radically beyond any capacity we might have to discover it.' See the discussion in *View*, 139.

other than reasoning.⁴⁰ For Nagel moral thinking is not ‘something else about action which the objective standpoint enables us to understand better’; it is rather applying objectivity to our practical reasoning. It is this ‘emptiness’ in his rationalist approach to ethical action that he refers to in the quotation above.

Nagel’s general approach to ethical motivation is, in many ways, Kantian. He too advances an ethical theory which contains *necessary conditions* for rational action. In a model similar to Kant’s conception of the categorical imperative, Nagel presumes that there are universal standards within myself and, importantly, that I can discover these standards and can ‘get outside of myself’ to reason morally.⁴¹ This ability to get out of myself is the source of my freedom, based on the ‘fact of reason’. Nagel explains:

The unquenchable persistence of the conviction that it is up to me to decide, all things considered, what I should do, is what Kant called the *fact of reason*.⁴² It reveals itself in decision, not in contemplation – in the permanent capacity we have to contemplate all the personal, contingent features of our motivational circumstances and ask, once again, “What should I do?” [...] It is not just a working out of the implications of my own perspective, but the demand that my actions conform to universally applicable standards that make them potentially part of a harmonious collective system. *Thus I find within myself the universal standards that enable me to get out of myself.*⁴³

Nagel associates himself with Kant’s identification of the importance of freedom, a freedom to see things not only from our own point of view: ‘[I]n this sense I believe Kant was right: the applicability to us of moral concepts is the consequence of our freedom – freedom that comes from the ability to see ourselves *objectively*, through the new choices which that ability forces on us.’⁴⁴

⁴⁰Nagel, *View*, 139-40.

⁴¹ Nagel, *Last Word*, 117 (my emphasis).

⁴² This is a reference to Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*.

⁴³ Nagel, *Last Word*, 117.

⁴⁴ Nagel, *Last Word*, 118. In *The View from Nowhere* Nagel elaborates on how questions of individual autonomy, connected as they are with matters of freedom and causality, are contradictory depending on whether they are viewed externally or internally. This contradiction between external and internal is connected to Nagel’s understanding of ‘thought from the outside’ and ‘thought from the inside’ which I discussed above. It is the external view/thought from the

For Nagel, then, because the source of our ethical motivation is not in the content of our subjective motivation *but in our reasoning*, we are able to in some way *participate* in a truth greater than our own relative position or perspective. Nagel maintains that the connection between objectivity and truth in ethics is, in a way, closer than it is in science. This is because in ethics we only have to ‘reorder our motives’ and ‘bring our external view into the determination of our conduct’, rather than make our thoughts accord with an external reality.⁴⁵

We have seen above how Nagel links objectivity as an epistemological stance with the development of a more inclusive moral view, one that takes into account the widest possible circumstances of our actions and hence brings us closer to the truth. This inclusive moral view is one through which we ‘discover (reasons for action) instead of deriving them from our pre-existing motives’ and where we ‘can acquire new motives superior to the old’.⁴⁶ There is a teleological implication to Nagel’s objectivist ethics based on his aspiration for greater objectivity, and it is to the place of teleology in his ethics that we now turn.

1.e Teleology and the participatory theory of truth

As we have seen in chapter 3, the emphasis on objectivity in Nagel’s epistemology allows him to expand the scope and reach of human reason.⁴⁷ This emphasis also leads him to propose an ethical theory that allows for the development of universal scope and deeper reach in our conception of morality.

outside that ‘makes us wish for more’ (*View*, 119). The external view, Nagel contends, ‘at once holds out the hope of genuine autonomy and snatches it away’ (*View*, 118). So we have the capacity to see things from the outside, and this is necessary and important. But as Nagel says, we can only *act* from inside the world. ‘We cannot assess and revise or confirm our entire system of thought and judgement from outside, for we would have nothing to do with it. We remain, as pursuers of knowledge, creatures inside the world who have not created ourselves, and some of whose processes of thought have been simply given to us.’ Nagel, *View*, 118.

⁴⁵ See Nagel, *View*, 139.

⁴⁶ See Nagel, *View*, 139.

⁴⁷ See section 1.a in chapter 3.

The development of objectivity in moral reasoning, superseding relativism and subjectivism, is for Nagel, analogous to the development of modern scientific enquiry.⁴⁸ Objective moral reasoning is closer to empirical inquiry than to logic or arithmetic, as Nagel does not believe practical reasoning can be reduced to a matter of self-evident steps.⁴⁹ In his view we have yet to establish ‘uncontroversial and well-developed methods for thinking’ about morality, in the way we have for science, and it is this that explains why we have, as yet, few agreed objective ethical standards:

Just as there was no guarantee at the beginnings of cosmological and scientific speculation that we humans had the capacity to arrive at objective truth beyond the deliverances of sense-perception – that in doing so we were doing anything more than spinning collective fantasies, so there can be no decision in advance as to whether we are talking about a real subject when we reflect and argue about morality.⁵⁰

But the attempt to achieve universal ethical standards through reasoning is, for Nagel, not just a matter of individual ethical behaviour but also of the collective moral development of humanity. We will be discussing the ethical and political implications of his concept of this collective moral development in part 2 of this chapter below, but it is important to note at this point that Nagel’s teleology of human moral progress towards the truth is not a matter of a deterministic ideology or a belief in the ultimate triumph of human good. Instead it is a matter of objective practical reasoning by individuals and the ‘dispersal’ of the results of this in individual and collective action. Therefore there can be no ‘decision in advance’ that the future will be moral, for ‘only the effort to reason about morality can show it is possible.’⁵¹

⁴⁸ Nagel’s understanding of scientific enquiry is objectivist: ‘The search for order and laws of nature seems from my amateur perspective to be driven by the broader idea that our local experiences and observations and the regularities we detect in them are manifestations of something else, something that includes us but on which none of us has a privileged perspective. Each of us is to think of our own experiences as presenting us with an arbitrary or random sample of the universe.’ Nagel, *Last Word*, 83-84. (And in the note to this paragraph he points out that Planck describes the aim of science as ‘the complete liberation of the physical picture from the individuality of the separate intellects’.)

⁴⁹ Nagel, *Last Word*, 101.

⁵⁰ Nagel, *Last Word*, 102.

⁵¹ Nagel, *Last Word*, 102.

Collective improvement, then, is not, in Nagel's view, inevitable,⁵² but the fact that we have a capacity for objectivity, i.e. a capacity to reason from an objective viewpoint, allows for the possibility of moral progress:

I do not think it is utopian to look forward to the gradual development of a greater universality of moral respect, an internalisation of moral objectivity analogous to the gradual internalisation of scientific progress that seems to be a feature of modern culture.⁵³

To recap, this gradual internalisation, and the moral progress that can result from it, is not based on a faith in human goodness or a historical inevitability. Nagel maintains there is no guarantee that we will succeed in our attempt to achieve moral progress, any more than that we will achieve objective knowledge of the universe. By rejecting a static concept of human nature as good or the outcome of human history as predetermined, Nagel maintains a teleological approach to moral progress that is *open*.⁵⁴ This open character is related to the realism we have discussed above – for the ethical judgements we make are a response to the world as it really is, independent of our perspective.⁵⁵ In this way, through practical reasoning, we can all participate in the truth.

⁵² 'It is evident that we are at a primitive stage of moral development.' Nagel, *View*, 186. Nagel continues, 'even the most civilized human beings have only a haphazard understanding of how to live, how to treat others, how to organize their societies.' He further makes the point that 'the idea that the basic principles of morality are *known*, and that the problems all come in their interpretation and application, is one of the most fantastic conceits to which our conceited species has been drawn.'

⁵³ Nagel, 'Limits', 138. Nagel discusses the 'problem of utopianism' in *Equality and Partiality*, but makes clear that he sees a role for 'imagining the moral future' as a key feature of political philosophy (Nagel, *Equality*, 6).

⁵⁴ I would suggest he shares his faith in a future society yet to be created by human beings with the 'warmer stream' of Marxism, despite his rejection (as we shall see when we consider his political theory in chapter 5) of a revolutionary socialist approach to political change. This warmer stream of Marxism differentiates itself from the crude materialism and 'scientific socialism' schools of the Marxist tradition. Terry Eagleton, himself an exemplar of this 'warmer stream', argues that Marx was the heir of both Romantic humanism and Enlightenment rationalism (Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009, 167). For a synthesis of Marxist and Christian teleology, see also see Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

⁵⁵ See section 1.a above on realism of value .

Summary

In the sections above I have outlined key features of Nagel's ethical theory that show how he makes the connection between reasoning and action. I have shown how his objectivism in ethics is a result of both his rationalism and his realism, and how this follows on from his epistemological objectivism. We have seen that his theory of ethical motivation is internalist but thoroughly rational, and that he comprehensively rejects subjectivism and relativism. Finally, we have seen how his open teleology reflects an aspiration for universality and depth in moral theory.

The significant features of Nagel's ethical theory I have outlined above crystallize in his concept of the impersonal standpoint, a standpoint that is the result of practical reasoning from the objective viewpoint. This standpoint arises from his view that as human beings we have the capacity for 'the gradual development of a greater universality of moral respect' generated by our capacity for 'an internalisation of moral objectivity'.⁵⁶ We will see in the sections below how the adoption of such a standpoint and its integration into our reasons for action is the basis of Nagel's hope for social progress.

2. The Impersonal Standpoint

Nagel sees the impersonal standpoint, and its corollary of impartiality, as the ethical basis for political action. The process of detachment needed to think from the impersonal standpoint is, in his view, exactly what brings the claims of others into consideration for public morality. This is because our mind has an objective capacity that drives us to think beyond appearances, and hence to share conceptions from socially divergent viewpoints.⁵⁷

I will outline below the importance for Nagel's ethics of the capacity to occupy an objective view in our *practical* reasoning, a capacity which allows us to adopt an

⁵⁶ See note 53 above.

⁵⁷ Nagel, *View*, 66.

impersonal standpoint even when we are part of the situation being considered.⁵⁸ The ability to transcend our personal perspective creates the possibility of shared interests beyond my personal or communal ones.⁵⁹ Thus there can be, in Nagel's opinion, a universal basis for the equality and social solidarity that are central to egalitarian politics.

By asserting the importance of the impersonal standpoint, based as we shall see on 'agent-neutral reasons for action', Nagel is able to provide grounds for a wider and deeper concept of moral responsibility and ethical politics than is to be found in subjectivist ethics. Indeed, he sees the restraint of subjectivism by objectivism in the self and society as the source of our collective moral and political progress.⁶⁰

But Nagel also sees a politically irresolvable tension in the balancing of the impersonal with the personal and the impartial with partialities. I shall establish the nature of this dilemma towards the end of this chapter before going on in chapter 5 to explain the implications this has for Nagel's political theory. In chapter 6 I shall then compare Nagel's rationalist model of self-transcendence in ethical practice and politics, notwithstanding the tensions between the two standpoints in the self, with that of the apophaticism of the Dionysian tradition.

2.a Objectivity and the allocation of value in a 'centreless' world

As we have discussed above Nagel's 'realism' about value is based on both the 'recognition of the reality of other persons' and the individual's 'capacity to

⁵⁸ Nagel, *Equality*, 14.

⁵⁹ 'The serious attempt to identify what is subjective and particular, or relative and communal, in one's outlook leads *inevitably* to the objective and universal' (Nagel, *Last Word*, 16; my emphasis). See also Nagel's comments on Descartes' conception of knowledge: 'We discover objective reason by discovering that we run up against certain limits when we inquire whether our beliefs, values, and so forth are subjective, culturally relative, or otherwise essentially perspectival. Certain forms of thought inevitably occur *straight* in the consideration of such hypotheses – revealing themselves to be objective in content.' (Nagel, *Last Word*, 23-24 his emphasis).

⁶⁰ An objective standpoint 'constrains our motives', Nagel, *View*, 138.

regard oneself as one amongst many'.⁶¹ This leads him to devise an ethical system where we have to take into account the perspectives of others and develop a 'view from nowhere'. For Nagel our subjective perspective, or indeed an intersubjective one, cannot alone justify our practical reasoning – our reasons for action.

If we reject value *for myself* alone as the basis for ethical action, as propounded in theories such as ethical egoism,⁶² Nagel suggests we are then faced with two alternatives in ascribing value to our reasons for action. We can either adopt a position that fully acknowledges the different perspectives and values of others, a 'descriptive' pluralism, or we can go beyond this intersubjectivity to make *general judgements* that are 'value-laden', i.e. adopt an ethical objectivism that goes beyond such pluralism.⁶³

It is relevant to note at this stage that descriptive moral pluralism is in itself an objective position about ethics. For to deny that we can make general judgements based on universal standards, i.e. to assert that intersubjectivity is all there is, is to make an objective claim.⁶⁴ Thus the difference between descriptive pluralism and Nagel's ethical objectivism is a matter not of the contrast between a subjective and an objective approach, but of different objective judgements on the allocation of value to the objective and the subjective.

If we adopt a purely descriptive pluralist approach (i.e. we make an objective judgement to accord value to people from their subjective perspective alone) we can acknowledge *equally valid* reasons for action, but no more. Though descriptive pluralism involves objective judgement, Nagel sees this as an inadequate basis for a moral theory.⁶⁵ This allocation of value on a purely

⁶¹ See section 1.a above on the importance of Nagel's realism to his objectivism.

⁶² Nagel, *Last Word*, 121-22.

⁶³ See the discussion in *The View from Nowhere*, 152-54. Before Nagel makes the distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons for action I shall discuss below, he makes another distinction relevant to ethical theory – whether reasons are broad or narrow. An abjuration, he maintains, can be universal but quite narrow – (e.g. 'don't lie'), but is in effect part of a broader principle (e.g. 'don't hurt others'). Narrow principles of practical reason may be universal but they may not be sufficient to give us a method of arriving at a definite conclusion as to what we should do.

⁶⁴ Nagel, *Last Word*, 119.

⁶⁵ Nagel, *Last Word*, 121.

subjective basis remains ‘objective’ in the sense that everyone is treated equally, but it ignores any issues of worth or value intrinsic to the individual *that may motivate us to take action*. The descriptive pluralist position may acknowledge the fact that other people have their own positions from which they have equally valid reasons for action, but it cannot account for the idea that my reasons for action can be affected by their interests as such.⁶⁶

The failure of descriptive pluralism and other ethical theories based on subjectivism to explain how others’ *interests* can motivate me leads Nagel to conclude that such theories are flawed and ultimately dishonest, as I shall argue further below. However, I now wish to elaborate on how the decision to allocate value on an objective basis follows on from Nagel’s assumptions about the relationship between the intersubjective and the objective.

We have considered (in section 1.b above) Nagel’s view that if we take seriously how we make judgements intersubjectively it can lead us to objective grounds for action. The allocation of value to the impersonal standpoint is the result of the same move from that which is personal and relative to me to that which is impersonal and universal. From the intersubjectivity of personal reasons for action, we move on to adopt an impersonal standpoint – a standpoint that is the result of an objective perspective on interests *detached* from our own view. But this detached viewpoint from which we assess the claims of others does not dilute the strength of their claim on me. In fact the demands on my agency from such a detached viewpoint go beyond descriptive pluralism because such claims are not limited by my subjective perspective.

When discussing the difference between descriptive pluralism and his egalitarian ethical theory, Nagel draws on the important distinction in moral theory between theories based solely on ‘agent-relative’ reasons for action, and those that also include ‘agent-neutral’ reasons.⁶⁷ Agent-relative reasons for action are those reasons that derive from a person’s own ‘interests, desires and attachments’, whilst agent-

⁶⁶ Nagel, *Last Word*, 121.

⁶⁷ Following Parfit, as he explains in *The View from Nowhere*, 152, note 4. See *View*, 152-56 for his discussion on agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons for action.

neutral reasons for action are reasons without any reference to the person. He explains the distinction in the following way:

If a reason can be given a general form which does not include an essential reference to the person who has it, it is an agent-neutral reason. [...] If on the other hand the general form of a reason does include an essential reference to the person who has it, it is an agent-relative reason. For example, if it is a reason for anybody to do or want something that would be in *his* interest, then this is a relative reason.⁶⁸

Both agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons for action are objective if they can be understood from outside the viewpoint of the individual who holds them.⁶⁹ However, in an ethical theory based solely on agent-relative reasons for action, I have no obligation to others unless what happens to them matters to me directly or instrumentally.⁷⁰ But Nagel believes an ethical theory based on agent-relative reasons for action alone is not a credible explanation of human behaviour, either for actions in my own self-interest or for action in the interests of others.

The importance of agent-neutral reasons for action in Nagel's ethical theory is that they are reasons for action which we can consider in detachment from any particular person's perspective, including our own - in other words, reasons for action that *anyone* would be motivated by through reasoning.⁷¹ If we turn to the matter of objective *worth* we can clarify why general judgements based on agent-neutral reasons for action are so significant for Nagel.

Nagel suggests that to maintain that human beings are only motivated by things that have value *for themselves* but not *in themselves* can lead us to the absurd position of balancing our subjective judgements against 'matters of life and death'.⁷² Someone who (following Hume) prefers the destruction of the whole world to the scratching

⁶⁸ Nagel, *View*, 153. He goes on to say In such a case, if something were in Jones's interests but contrary to Smith's, Jones would have a reason to want it to happen and Smith would have the same reason to not want it to happen.

⁶⁹ Nagel, *View*, 153.

⁷⁰ See the discussion in Nagel, *Last Word*, 119-22.

⁷¹ See the discussion in Nagel, *View*, 152-56.

⁷² Nagel, *Last Word*, 122.

of his finger may be able to convince us that his reasoning is not logically contradictory, but cannot convince us that objectively he is right without us adopting an ‘over-narrow’ concept of reasoning that would exclude the agent-neutral perspective.⁷³ Without necessarily characterising all subjectivist ethical theories in this dismissive way, we can accept Nagel’s point that there is a form of ‘dishonesty’ in the limited nature of descriptive pluralism and similar theories which maintain that reasons for action can only be relative.⁷⁴

In Nagel’s centreless world we must accept that my reasons for action have some basis in a concept of value that has nothing (directly) to do with what has value *for* me, and that such an impersonal allocation of value is necessary for ethics. When we allocate value on the basis of agent-neutral reasons for action, we are exercising our capacity *to see ourselves as others see us*. Such a capacity, and the impersonal standpoint that results, is essential for the ‘impartial interpersonal concern’ that Nagel articulates as the foundation of social morality, and is key to the development of a fuller moral and political egalitarianism.⁷⁵ Though we are people with a subjective viewpoint and subjective interests,⁷⁶ our understanding of ourselves as moral and political agents is based on reasoning from the perspective of our ‘objective self’, our adoption of the impersonal standpoint.

The internalisation of objectivity allows us to achieve a centreless political view, and as we shall see below Nagel struggles with how we can create a society that will encourage such an internalisation in our personal lives.⁷⁷ But moving on to discuss

⁷³ Nagel, *View*, 154-45.

⁷⁴ See the discussion in Nagel, *Last Word*, p 122-24. In Nagel’s view, this dishonesty applies equally to our view of the objective worth of others and having an objective perspective of our own worth. If we do not impart value to agent-neutral reasons for action we are not only unable to make valid judgements about others’ worth, but also to decide between what constitutes self-destructive behaviour and what is acting in our own interests. For to acknowledge I have value *in myself* allows me to discriminate between what is of value *for me* but is not objectively in my interest.

⁷⁵ Nagel, *Last Word*, 124.

⁷⁶ By subjective interests Nagel means both our own personal wants and needs and those of people close to us who we may feel personally responsible for. In other words, these are equally obligations on us, but ones that we see from our subjective viewpoint.

⁷⁷ Nagel, *Equality*, 15. The internalisation of moral objectivity through our commitment to citizenship means that the impersonal ‘restrains’ the personal, for example in social policy decisions (made by collective agreement) that the state should act in an impartial way. But the internalisation of moral objectivity also demands that the impersonal standpoint has to be internalised in our personal lives. Indeed, Nagel argues that we should aim for people to develop a liking for more and more impartial social activities.

the relationship between the impersonal standpoint and political impartiality, we need to explore further the significance of the impersonal standpoint in Nagel's moral philosophy by highlighting how it partakes of the open teleology of incompleteness we find in Nagel's epistemological objectivism.

2.b The impersonal standpoint and the teleology of the 'moral gap'

For Nagel the ambition to achieve the impersonal standpoint in matters of morality (and as we shall see, to achieve an impartial stance in politics) is analogous to the 'humiliating and unrealistic' philosophical aspiration towards epistemological objectivity we have discussed above.⁷⁸ The teleology of objectivity in Nagel's epistemology has positive features in terms of openness and engagement with the real world.⁷⁹ This openness is equally a feature of the aspiration for the impersonal and the impartial in practical reasoning, which allows us to be motivated by the interests of others. But just as in epistemology, the search for truth through practical reasoning is by its nature incomplete. For if we acknowledge moral obligations that go far beyond our own personal interests, as Nagel's ethical theory does, we come across demands on our agency that are near to impossible to fulfil. Yet not to strive to fulfil them is to deny an essential aspect of ourselves. As Nagel points out,

If people's lives matter impersonally at all, they matter hugely. They matter so much, in fact, that the recognition of it is hard to bear, and most of us engage in some degree of suppression of the impersonal standpoint in order to avoid facing our pathetic failure to meet its claims [...] Suppression of the full force of the impersonal standpoint is a denial of our full humanity and the basis for a full recognition of the value of our own lives.⁸⁰

This concept of a *moral gap* between how we humans are and what we aspire to be, between the moral demands on us and our capacities to live by these demands, is an

⁷⁸ See chapter 3, section 1.a.

⁷⁹ See chapter 3, section 1a and also section 1.a of this chapter.

⁸⁰ Nagel, *Equality*, 19-20.

issue addressed by ethicists and theologians alike.⁸¹ John Cottingham believes this issue is at the heart of current debates in analytical moral philosophy on the problem of ‘demandingness’. He sees the gap between how things are and how things should be as the source of both the religious impulse and ethical motivation.⁸² He explains this ‘moral gap’ in a way that parallels Nagel’s understanding of the demands of the impersonal standpoint, but from a psychoanalytic perspective:

Let us assume, for the moment, that it is a moral truth that humans cannot live well if they reject the demand for progressive moral improvement. On a personal and psychological level, the problem of responding to that demand will now immediately become one of achieving integration and wholeness. For as long as there is a psychic split between what I feel like doing and what I am morally called to do [...] there will be an unresolved tension at the heart of my moral nature.⁸³

Nagel likewise discusses the tension between the differing demands of the impersonal and personal standpoints in his ethical theory. We shall see in our discussion below that Nagel also relates the political problem of the competing demands of impartiality and partiality to this tension *within our selves* of the impersonal and personal standpoints, and I shall be following this through in my comparison of Nagel’s ethics and the ethics of the Dionysian apophatic tradition in chapter 6. Before this, however, we need to explain how the demands of the impersonal standpoint are also the basis for Nagel’s emphasis on the importance of impartiality in politics.⁸⁴

⁸¹ For an example of an attempt to straddle the debate in ethics and theology (taking Kantian ethics as its starting point) see John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God’s Assistance* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996).

⁸² See Cottingham, *Spiritual Dimension* especially pp. 75-76.

⁸³ Cottingham, *Spiritual Dimension*, 75. Cottingham argues that analytical moral philosophy has been unnecessarily hostile to the psychoanalytic tradition (and religion), but ‘[m]oral and psychoanalytical enlightenment turn out in practice to be closely connected, and indeed it seems to me highly plausible to suppose [...] that the first requires the second. The interdependence of psychoanalytical and religious modes of thinking is even more striking. It is reasonable, as John Hare has argued, to think the idea of a *moral gap* between how we humans are and what we aspire to be, is central to the religious impulse.’ Cottingham, *Spiritual Dimension*, 74.

⁸⁴ It is this tension that is at the core of *Equality and Partiality*: see especially chapter 2, ‘The Two standpoints’

2.c Impartiality and partiality

As I have shown above in my discussion of agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons for action in Nagel's ethical theory, the allocation of value to the impersonal standpoint makes my reasons for action moral. Similarly, the allocation of value to the impartial viewpoint makes an ethical politics possible.⁸⁵ In adopting an impartial stance, however, we have to deal with not only the demands from the impersonal standpoint but also with the competing demands of others' personal standpoints. How Nagel sees the clash between partiality and impartiality, and how he tries to carefully balance this to maintain an ethical ground for politics, will be the focus of this section, before I go on to discuss the clash between these 'two standpoints' in further sections below. I shall consider this clash, and Nagel's two-standpoint model, in the wider context of Nagel's egalitarian political theory in chapter 5.

We have seen that, for Nagel, it is our ability to transcend our personal perspective that creates the possibility of shared interests beyond personal or even communal ones.⁸⁶ This capacity for self-transcendence is the basis of both moral action and ethical politics. To remain at the level of agreement between self-interested parties, as much political engagement is often presented and explained, is to remain at the level of intersubjectivity – only acknowledging the demands of agent-relative reasons for action. Instead Nagel is intent on developing a politics based on the ethics of the impersonal standpoint and the universal values that result.

Shared social interests, according to Nagel, must include not only the collective satisfaction of the same interests but also collective agreement on the satisfaction of our differing interests. We need agreement from the impersonal perspective (what everyone may want) alongside agreement on the valid priority given to the particular wants and needs of each individual or community. He believes that the search for political legitimacy in a liberal society is a search for agreement on

⁸⁵ 'Any political theory that aspires to moral decency must try to devise and justify a form of *institutional life* which answers to the real strength of impersonal values [...] Any moral theory which is not related to such a political theory must be regarded as incomplete.' Nagel, *Equality*, 19 (my emphasis).

⁸⁶ Nagel, *Equality*, 16.

how to incorporate the demands of the impersonal and the demands of the personal, i.e. what is important in everyone's life *and* what is important to each of us.⁸⁷ To accommodate the concepts of shared interests and the collective acceptance of different interests in a way that acknowledges political realities, Nagel posits the allocation of value to both the impartial *and* the balancing of partialities.⁸⁸ I shall now consider further how he suggests this can be done.

Whilst Nagel's key ethical emphasis is on the importance of the impersonal standpoint, he believes that the personal perspective too has validity in the social sphere. He holds that the objective viewpoint, whilst absolutely necessary, cannot replace the subjective.⁸⁹ In other words, just as his epistemology acknowledges both the objective and subjective viewpoints, so his moral philosophy acknowledges the two standpoints of the impersonal and the personal. He aspires in his political philosophy to achieve regulation of these two standpoints on an objective basis, and this regulated coexistence of the personal and impersonal standpoints within the self underlies his balancing of the partial and the impartial in society.⁹⁰ It is necessary for our purposes to examine further how this 'balancing' is based on the subjective and objective perspectives, and their relationship within our political thinking.

Just as Nagel perceives subjectivist ethics as 'dishonest' in its rejection of objective moral worth, he also believes that any social system that does not incorporate impartiality as a basis for its universal standards cannot be truly ethical.⁹¹ He makes this clear when discussing the moral and psychological viability of an egalitarian political system:

If impartiality is not admitted as an important motive in determining the acceptability of a social system – if every such system is a bargain struck

⁸⁷ Nagel, *Equality*, 33.

⁸⁸ This is achieved ethically by the allocation of a component of impartiality to that balancing of our partialities: see *Equality*, 47.

⁸⁹ See *View*, 155, where Nagel considers the problems of the objectifying impulse taking over the subjective view. He does not believe that it is 'possible or desirable' for the objective impersonal standpoint to outweigh the personal perspective in the social sphere – he does not believe the demands of impartiality can replace personal aims completely. What this means politically is discussed further in *Equality and Partiality*, especially chapters 10-12.

⁹⁰ Nagel, *Equality*, chapter 2.

⁹¹ See the discussion of the absurdity, and the fundamentally flawed and dishonest nature, of subjective ethical theory in section 2.a above.

among self-interested parties – then there will be no call for equality except to the extent needed to ensure stability. But I believe that impartiality emerges from an essential aspect of the human point of view, and that it naturally seeks expression through the institutions under which we live.⁹²

The aspiration to have an ethical politics based on allocating value in an impartial way, then, can lead to new and open possibilities in social thought; to put it more exactly, the internalisation of moral objectivity that is the basis for Nagel's concept of political impartiality has a teleological aspect. But nowhere is this internalisation more difficult to achieve, and new possibilities more difficult to create, than in the field of politics, where the partiality of vested interests is often stronger than the power of political institutions with a democratic mandate for impartiality.⁹³

There are important differences between the balancing of the impersonal and the personal perspectives in deciding on our reasons for action as individuals and the balancing of the impartial and the partial as citizens in a society. Political institutions have vastly greater powers of transformation than do personal relations, and participation in these institutions is not voluntary.⁹⁴ Despite the enormous potential of political institutions to take action on the basis of a strict impartiality, Nagel believes that for any political system to have *legitimacy* it has to balance this with our partiality. It is precisely the collective decisions that are made about how and where we draw the line between impartiality and partiality that are key for those who aspire to justice, social and economic equality and tolerance of different cultures, perspectives and convictions.⁹⁵

⁹² Nagel, *Equality*, 63-64. Nagel's attempt to use of a model of Kantian unanimity to underpin political legitimacy, which I discuss below, is also another way he makes the plea that politics should be more like morality – in this case in its aim of unanimous acceptability. *Equality*, 46.

⁹³ And furthermore, those institutions with such an impartial mandate may encounter difficulty in delivering this mandate in an impartial way. Nagel discusses the difficulty of the internal culture of political institutions in *Equality and Partiality*, and notes that the political institutions we expect to act impartially themselves have to struggle to act impartially (they are after all run by people!).

⁹⁴ See Nagel, *Equality*, 17-18, and the discussion in chapter 10 on equality and motivation.

⁹⁵ Balanced with Nagel's view that impartiality naturally seeks expression through political institutions there is an accompanying principle, what he terms our 'natural partiality'. He starts from the perspective that we all have attachment to 'personal interests, projects and commitments', but this is restrained by our occupation of the impersonal standpoint in two ways. The first restraint is that we recognise the equal objective importance of what happens to everyone, the second our recognition of the special importance for each person of his own point of view (and the reasonableness of some partiality). We can acknowledge shared interests that may be the same interests, but we also have the capacity to share a collective acceptance of different interests. Nagel, *Equality*, 37-38.

So Nagel holds that for the sake of political legitimacy in a liberal democratic society, it is necessary to take into account the subjective perspective, i.e. people's private choices and personal motivations.⁹⁶ Nagel's political aim as a liberal egalitarian is to achieve a balance between partiality and impartiality without losing sight of the egalitarian social ideal. However, in following through his argument we have seen that the coexistence of personal and impersonal standpoints is itself a tension. In the next section we will explain why Nagel comes to the conclusion that the tensions between the personal and impersonal standpoints cannot be resolved by purely political means.

2.d The problem of the two standpoints

We have seen that Nagel is committed to the aspiration toward a greater internalisation of moral objectivity, and believes that this is a necessary driver for progressive political change. However he believes this very aspiration creates a dilemma, one that goes far beyond the familiar problem of collectivity versus individuality in political theory.⁹⁷ For Nagel the problem of integration in our ethical life results from the tension between the impersonal and personal standpoints *within the individual*. This tension between the impersonal and the personal, manifested in social and political thought as a clash between impartiality and partiality,⁹⁸ has its echo in the epistemological split between the objective self and the subjective perspective.

As we have seen, he identifies this split in the self as the result of the advance of objectivity and the development of the objective self.⁹⁹ The adoption of the impersonal standpoint 'generates [...] a massive impartial addition to each individual's values without any indication of how this is to be combined with the

⁹⁶ Nagel, 'Limits', 112.

⁹⁷ 'The unsolved problem is the familiar one of reconciling the standpoint of collectivity with the standpoint of the individual; but I want to approach it not primarily as a question about the relation between the individual and society, but in essence and origin as a question about each individual's relation to himself.' Nagel, *Equality*, 3.

⁹⁸ As I have explained in section 2b above.

⁹⁹ Nagel, *View*, 86-89.

personal values that are already there'.¹⁰⁰ Moral advance towards greater impartiality only exacerbates the problem.

The discovery and awakening of the objective self with its universal character doesn't imply that one is not a creature with an empirical perspective and individual life. Objective advance produces a split in the self, and as it gradually widens, the problems of integration between the two standpoints becomes severe, particularly in regard to ethics and personal life.¹⁰¹

Any attempted resolution of the problem of the two standpoints by an 'excessive impersonality' which denies the importance of the empirical perspective and personal life is explicitly rejected by Nagel. To leave out the subjective side of ethical thought does not resolve the issue. Indeed, Nagel believes that to attempt to give the values that arise from the impersonal standpoint dominance over the personal, so that we become mere 'instruments for the realisation of those impersonal values that appear from an impersonal standpoint', is to revert to utilitarianism.¹⁰² He contrasts a utilitarian concept of the impersonal, one where we live 'as if we were under the direction of an impartial benevolent spectator of the world in which we appear as one among billions' with what he describes as a 'Kantian development of the impersonal standpoint'. Instead of replacing individual perspectives with an impersonal one, as a utilitarian approach would propose, Nagel attempts to see things '*simultaneously* from each individual's point of view and to arrive at a form of motivation which they can all share'.¹⁰³

In addition to the 'benevolent spectator' flaw of utilitarianism, Nagel identifies two other 'dangerous' dismissals of the subjective viewpoint that are to be avoided. The first is what he calls 'false objectification', which is the failure to recognise that objectivity as a method will not work in all areas of life. The second is to give up any attempt at a resolution to what he terms the 'insoluble

¹⁰⁰ He goes on to say, 'The individual is of course counted as one amongst many whose life is seen to have value from the impersonal standpoint, but that does not make his special personal interest in his own life go away. This is, I think, an acutely uncomfortable position.' Nagel, *Equality*, 6.

¹⁰¹ Nagel, *View*, 86.

¹⁰² Nagel, *Equality*, 56.

¹⁰³ See Nagel, *Equality*, 15-16; my emphasis.

conflict' between the objective and subjective.¹⁰⁴ In order to make clearer what Nagel means by this idea of 'insoluble conflict' it is helpful to shift our focus from the broader issues of objective-subjective to focus on the self. For when we do apply 'double vision' to our understanding of our own self, certain issues come into play which, though they are irresolvable, cannot be dismissed. Indeed, as Nagel argues, both objective and subjective aspects are necessary to our understanding of the nature of the self, and both need to be held onto in some way rather than let go.¹⁰⁵

In Nagel's understanding, the subject-object conflict arises when we are unable to combine an objective conception of something with a subjective conception of the same thing. But if we accept the limits of objectivity, as I have outlined above, it becomes clear that the object of understanding cannot be [...] cleanly divided', particularly if the object of understanding is ourselves.¹⁰⁶ This lack of clear division in the self is, he says, 'at the source of some of the most difficult problems of philosophy, including the problems of personal identity, free will, and the meaning of life'.¹⁰⁷ When we attempt a resolution of the conflict between our objective and subjective conceptions of the self then we must accept that this will be a new 'mixed understanding'.¹⁰⁸

From an ethical point of view, Nagel maintains that this problem manifests itself in issues of agency and of self-identity, and I shall consider further how the issues of agency and self-identity are problematic in Nagel's objectivist ethics

¹⁰⁴ See the discussion on 'double vision' Nagel, *View*, 86-89. On the danger of false objectification, he says: 'The success of a particular form of objectivity in expanding our grasp of some aspects of reality may tempt us to apply the same methods in areas where they will not work, either because those areas require a new objectivity or because they are irreducibly subjective.' He makes the point that 'most notably reductive analyses [are produced by the analysis] of one type of thing in terms that are taken from the objective understanding of another, Nagel, *View*, 87.

¹⁰⁵ 'Ordinarily, an objective view of something with a subjective aspect does not require us to give up the subjective view [...] but in these cases that option seems not to be available. We cannot regard our ideas of our own agency or of the purity of our self-identity through time as mere appearances or impressions. That would be equivalent to giving them up.' Nagel, *View*, 89.

¹⁰⁶ An example of a clear divide would be the primary and secondary qualities of an object' see Nagel, *View*, 87.

¹⁰⁷ He adds: 'It is also present in the theory of knowledge, where it takes the form of an inability to hold in one's mind simultaneously and in consistent form the possibility of scepticism and the ordinary beliefs life is full of.' Nagel, *View*, 87

¹⁰⁸ We have to attempt a resolution because we need to live an integrated life' see the discussion on the connection between the ethics of individual conduct and political theory in Nagel, *Equality*, 17-20.

when I draw my comparison of his understanding of self-transcendence and ethical practice with that contained in the ethics of detachment in the Dionysian apophatic tradition in chapter 6 – where we shall see that the Dionysian apophatic tradition goes beyond Nagel’s concept of ‘mixed understanding’. Before I move on to this, after my consideration of Nagel’s egalitarian political theory in chapter 5, I wish to conclude this chapter by establishing the connection Nagel makes between the political problem of impartiality and partiality as discussed above, and the conflict between the collective and the individual in political theory. For Nagel believes that the more we become aware of the demands of impartiality, the closer we are drawn into an awareness of how the personal and the impersonal within our self exist in irresolvable tension. This aporia inhibits our aspiration toward a more egalitarian society, because the demands of partiality, based on the accommodation of the personal perspective, limit collective action that could lead to greater social and economic equality.

2.e Impartiality and inequality – a problem of politics and the soul

Nagel sees the fact that there are two standpoints, the impersonal and the personal, both with ethical validity, as a political as well as a moral dilemma. The standpoint of the individual and the impersonal collective appear to be in conflict. He suggests that the integration of the two standpoints may be aided through the development of a society where impartiality can become more and more the basis for our lives, where we can ‘externalise through social institutions the most impartial requirements of the impersonal standpoint’.¹⁰⁹ The tradition of liberal politics itself, he argues, accepts the externalisation of some form of impersonal value into the collective action of political institutions.¹¹⁰ Further, the aspiration for political legitimacy in liberal societies has meant that the demands of impartiality, leading to greater collective provision, have been a positive driver for change.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Nagel, *Equality*, 53.

¹¹⁰ Nagel, *Equality*, 57. Obvious examples would be the universal provision, or effective regulation, of social goods (e.g. education, welfare and healthcare) by the state.

¹¹¹ Nagel, *Equality*, 57-58. Examples Nagel uses include the abolition of chattel slavery and the enfranchisement of women.

In *Equality and Partiality* as well as other writings on politics and social justice, Nagel does propose structural solutions to tackle the competing political demands of impartiality and partiality in society. These proposed solutions chart a course between utopianism, socialism and free-market capitalism, based on Nagel's liberal egalitarian views. He advances the case for a 'moral division of labour' – a new settlement in the external relations between individuals, and between individuals and public institutions – based on his understanding of the division in the self.¹¹² In such a division of labour he suggests that the impersonal standpoint can take on a greater role in our individual life through both the search for 'impersonally acceptable ways to express our individuality' and also the 'greater penetration of the character of individual life by institutional and conventional structures which serve the good of everyone in an acceptable manner'.¹¹³ He has in mind nothing less than a recasting of the balance of motivational allegiances between our general roles as 'citizen, voter, taxpayer' alongside our particular roles in employment, and in our interface with the 'military, the educational system, the government bureaucracy, and the judicial system', and our personal position in a 'family, a religion, or a cultural, racial, or ethnic sub-community'.¹¹⁴ I shall be revisiting this conception of the moral division of labour when I critique Nagel's structure of the self in chapter 6.

Nagel maintains that changing institutional arrangements and political structures leads on to changes in social practices and human behaviour, but he does not believe these can override or address the complexities of our personal motivations.¹¹⁵ He accepts private choice and personal motivation as valid economic motives that must be accommodated politically, but acknowledges that 'the operation of such motives in the economy seems bound to frustrate the pursuit of a comprehensive egalitarian ideal'.¹¹⁶ For him, liberal societies, even in their more egalitarian form, allow such free choice that it leads to vast inequalities of wealth and power. Such inequality is,

¹¹² See especially Nagel, *Equality*, chapters 6 and 9.

¹¹³ See Nagel, *Equality*, chapter 7, and especially p. 60.

¹¹⁴ Nagel, *Equality*, 61.

¹¹⁵ Nagel explicitly rejects the possibility of a transformation of human beings whereby the contradictions of the impersonal and personal are erased (he is thinking of Marxism); see *Equality*, 53. He does, however, see more purchase in Rousseau's idea of the social contract 'returning to each of us a reconstructed self', and believes this can be adapted to 'more articulated forms of socialisation' (Nagel, *Equality*, 60. I shall discuss his criticism of Marxism further in chapter 5, section 3.b below, on ethical motivation and the egalitarian ideal.

¹¹⁶ Nagel, *Equality*, 91.

in his view, ‘incompatible with an adequate response to the impartial attitude which is the first manifestation of the impersonal standpoint’.¹¹⁷

Despite his suggestions for structural change and greater egalitarianism in society, Nagel remains pessimistic about the extent to which this is possible.¹¹⁸ This is in no small part because of his recognition of the tendency in liberal societies for what he terms the ‘better-off’ to resist anything other than a modest pursuit of socio-economic equality. This he analyses as resulting from the distorting influence on democratic politics of large concentrations of wealth and resulting psychological dispositions. He believes any democratic mandate for greater socio-economic equality must overcome a great hurdle – that those who wish to preserve existing inequalities have political control. Added to this is the fact that living in an unequal society itself limits the aspirations of those who have a vested interest in a more equal society, as they do not have experiences of greater expectations being met. For Nagel, then, people’s individual motivations matter, and the need to deal with these cannot be ignored if we seek political change.¹¹⁹

Despite Nagel’s attempts to deal structurally with the divisions between the demands of objectivity and our subjective perspective, it is clear that he does not see the resolution of the tension between the impersonal and personal (and impartial and partial) as something that can be achieved purely through political action.¹²⁰ In this Nagel follows Plato in maintaining that the political problem of integration between the two standpoints is one that must be solved in the individual soul if it is to be solved at all.¹²¹ For reconciling the standpoint of collectivity and the standpoint of

¹¹⁷ He continues, ‘The liberal state may be better than the competition [and by the competition he means “radical alternatives which have been inescapably revealed as utopian”] but it is not good enough, and not just because it isn’t working as intended.’ Nagel, *Equality*, 58.

¹¹⁸ Nagel, *Equality*, 58.

¹¹⁹ See his discussion of this in *Equality*, 59.

¹²⁰ For two reasons, as discussed in part 2 above: (a) it is not desirable, and (b) it is not achievable.

¹²¹ ‘The political problem, as Plato believed it, must be solved within the individual soul if it is to be solved at all. It does not mean that the solution will not deal with interpersonal relations and public institutions. But it means that such “external” solutions will only be valid if they give expression to an adequate response to the division in the self, conceived as a problem for each individual.’ Nagel, *Equality*, 16. In *The View from Nowhere* Nagel also explains that ‘ethics, and the ethical basis of political theory, have to be understood as arising from a division in each individual between two standpoints, the personal and the impersonal.’ Nagel, *View*, 85.

the individual, which Nagel sees as the central problem of political philosophy, is ‘in essence and origin a question about each individual’s relationship to himself’.¹²²

Summary

We have seen that, for Nagel, in practical reasoning based on objectivist assumptions in epistemology and ethics we participate in a truth greater than our individual viewpoint and interests. This participation depends upon our acknowledgement of the widest possible physical, mental, social and political context of our actions, which we can understand by reasoning, and this in turn *opens up* our epistemological, ethical and political understanding.¹²³

In our explanation of the place of the impersonal standpoint in Nagel’s ethical and political theory we have seen that his objectivist approach, though essential to his ethical theory, contains certain irreducible tensions within it. Whilst the allocation of value to agent-neutral reasons for action is necessary for ethical action, the demands of the impersonal standpoint that result from this appear endless. Further, Nagel’s carefully balanced acknowledgement of the importance of impartiality alongside the fair assessment of partialities leads to an unsatisfactory situation, since it appears that the demands of collective justice are undermined by the tensions within communities and within the individual citizen. Though the open nature of Nagel’s theory of moral advancement may be lauded, nevertheless because of these tensions he is ultimately pessimistic about how a new moral settlement can be achieved that allows greater social and economic equality.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have continued my analysis of Nagel’s rationalism and his criticisms of the limitations of subjectivist and relativist ethical theory. His emphasis on the

¹²² Nagel, *Equality*, 3.

¹²³ See my discussion of open epistemology in chapter 3, and the ethical implications of this discussed in section 1 of this chapter.

importance of objectivity in practical reasoning leads to a justification of the universality of values which themselves are a response to the reality of the world. Nagel's rationalism and realism imply a teleology of moral progress with an aspiration toward objectivity and ethical truth.

In the last chapters of this thesis I shall be drawing a comparison between the way Nagel balances the demands of the impersonal and the personal in the self whilst maintaining an aspiration toward a more equal society and the concept of self-transcendence in contemplation and the practice of virtue in the Dionysian apophatic tradition. The mystics of the Dionysian apophatic tradition, influenced by Neoplatonic metaphysics and its development by early Christian thinkers, also had a theory of the human intellect as capable of an inclusive objectivity based upon a participation in truth.¹²⁴ We will see how the ethical issues addressed in the concept of selfhood in this tradition in some way prefigure the tensions I have identified between the personal and impersonal in Nagel's ethical theory.

In this comparison I will make the case that the Dionysian apophatic tradition matches Nagel's commitment to rationality and can provide the basis for an egalitarian ethics that is also objectivist and teleological. I will develop my argument that the spirituality of the intellectual stream of the Dionysian apophatic tradition can support an ethical praxis that is, like Nagel's, egalitarian and realist. I will show that an apophatic justification exists for a contemporary politics that follows Nagel's rationalist and realist trajectory, and the universality of values that results from this. Before I do this it is necessary to examine in more detail the egalitarian nature of Nagel's political theory.

¹²⁴ This participation in truth was the soul's participation in the qualities of God, because there is a 'likeness' between God and the soul's essence. This concept of likeness developed from Neoplatonic ideas (see the discussion on likeness in chapter 2), and is also found in Augustine's conception of the *imago dei*; in other words, our human intellect is the image of the divine Mind within us. There is a dynamic aspect to the *imago dei*, as the 'ever-present possibility of participation in God' exists because the *imago* is both *given* and *yet to come*. See Williams, *Divine Sense*. Our ethical motivation, then, is the result of the human situation – suspended between how things *are* and how they *could be*.

Chapter 5

Impartiality and Equality in Nagel's Political Theory

Nagel's political theory is part of his moral theory, which assumes that reasoning is the source of our ethical motivation. It is the adoption of the impersonal standpoint and its application to the circumstances of public life that makes ethical politics possible.¹ Nagel has a centreless understanding of the detachment and moral universalism necessary for public decision-making – a political 'view from nowhere' – on which his conception of impartiality, his individualistic and redistributive justification for equality, and his adoption of an egalitarian political position are all based. For Nagel egalitarian values are implicit and intrinsic to political impartiality, and I will explore in this chapter how this link between impartiality and equality is central to his liberal egalitarianism.² The tension in Nagel's political theory between partiality and equality in society which I shall discuss below is a reflection of the problem of the two standpoints of the personal and the impersonal within the self I have discussed in chapter 4. Following my explanation of the political implications of Nagel's 'two standpoints' theory in this chapter and the comparison with the model of the self in the thought of Meister Eckhart in the next I will, in the final chapter of this thesis, consider a possible alternative reframing and resolution of this tension in ethical life using the insights of the Dionysian apophatic tradition into the nature of self-transcendence.

1. Nagel's Political Theory

For Nagel, public morality has different criteria from private morality and the principles of one cannot be directly transposed to the other. There are political virtues of accountability and representation that cannot be explained in terms of the personal relations between individuals or intra-community relations. In order to act

¹ By 'public life' I mean the participation of all individuals in public activity – through electoral politics, the institutions of civil society, voluntary and community activity etc. - not specifically the holders of public office.

² Egalitarianism defined as 'the doctrine that moral and political life should aim at respecting and enhancing the equality of persons'. Simon Blackburn, comp., *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 110.

ethically in the area of public morality, we have to transcend personal and communal interests;³ we cannot remain at the level of the intersubjective. For Nagel the source of moral value is reasoning from the impersonal standpoint. Ethical politics is based on our human capacity to stand back and imagine ourselves ‘in someone else’s shoes’ – and to act in public life with this in mind.⁴ The unanimity necessary for a public morality, and hence political legitimacy, does not, then, originate from the character of individuals, or the quality of their interpersonal or intra-communal relations. Mutual respect, reciprocity or solidarity may be worthy characteristics in society, but our reasons for action cannot be accessed at this intersubjective level. Instead we have to aspire to a centreless world view where each individual has value in him/herself.

In the first two sections of this chapter below I shall examine Nagel’s understanding of the action-centred nature of public morality and the place of moral consequentialism in his political philosophy, and then consider his critique of rights-based political theories.⁵

1.a Nagel’s moral consequentialism and utilitarianism

Nagel explicitly founds his liberal egalitarianism on consequentialist grounds, but eschews utilitarianism and its majoritarian assumptions. Though majoritarian utilitarian theory and his moral consequentialism appear to have an affinity in their

³ Nagel expresses distaste for, and a suspicion of, the bonds of solidarity based on something less than a universal sympathy (‘I myself find solidarity which depends on racial, linguistic, or religious identification distasteful [...] there is always a potentially sinister side to it’). For ‘solidarity with a particular group means lack of identification with, and less sympathy for, those who are not members of that group and often it means active hostility to outsiders.’ Nevertheless he accepts that it is a powerful source of political allegiance and can build up support for more general collective action. Nagel, *Equality*, 178.

⁴ Putting yourself in other people’s shoes is a shorthand formulation of the impersonal standpoint that Nagel repeats in many of his writings. See, for example, p. 126 of the chapter on ‘Equality’ in Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁵ Moral consequentialism defined as ‘the view that the value of an action derives entirely from the value of its consequences’ (Blackburn, *Dictionary of Philosophy*, 74-75). In *Mortal Questions* Nagel points out that because ‘within the appropriate limits, public decisions will be justifiably more consequentialist than private ones. They [...] have larger consequences to take into account.’ Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 84.

concern for equity (the interests of every individual are counted as of equal weight) they differ in their criteria for action-centred morality.⁶ As Nagel explains, '[w]hat it means to give equal weight to each person's point of view depends on what is morally essential to that point of view, what it is in each of us that must be given equal weight.'⁷ In utilitarianism it is the combination of the interests of all individuals that matters, whilst in Nagel's theory it is the interests of *each* individual that matters. We will see that his theory is based on a richer and more comprehensive concept of 'each person's point of view' than utilitarianism and (as I shall show in the next section) rights-based theories. Though Nagel accepts the validity of arguments from utility and their place in political theory, he maintains that political theory must take each person's perspective into account.

In contrast with many utilitarian theories, Nagel's moral consequentialism is explicit about the need for an order of priorities in the satisfaction of human wants and needs.⁸ A system of priority implies that the claims of individuals have to be ranked in terms of specific wants and needs, and such ranking requires an objective standard. Further, satisfying the needs of the worse off must be considered urgent compared to the claims of the better off to improvements in their lives. This objective standard, in Nagel's view, should also include a relative estimation by individuals of the priorities of their own lives.⁹

It is this focus on the need for an objective standard of priorities for the claims of individuals that leads Nagel to adopt an egalitarian political position. He explains:

What makes a system egalitarian is the priority it gives to the claims of those whose overall life prospects put them at the bottom, irrespective of numbers or

⁶ Though utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism, Nagel does not accept utilitarian calculation in either a direct or non-qualitative form. He explains the relation of majoritarianism and utilitarianism in the following way: 'the moral equality of utilitarianism is a kind of majority rule: each person's interests count only once, but some may be outweighed by others. It is not really a majority of *persons* that determines the result, but a majority of interests suitably weighted for intensity [...] [It is] majoritarian because each individual is accorded the same (variable) weight and the outcome is determined by the largest total.' Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 112.

⁷ Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 112.

⁸ Nagel does not accept Bentham's reductive calculation of pleasure and pain, for example, or indeed any form of direct utilitarianism.

⁹ Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 117. Nagel makes it clear that the objective standard has to apply to people's lives in an holistic way: it is not to be based on 'momentary preferences, desires and experiences' but on 'health, nourishment, freedom, work, education, self-respect, affection, pleasure.'

of overall utility. Each individual with a more urgent claim has priority, in the simplest version of such a view, over each individual with a less urgent claim. The moral equality of egalitarianism consists in taking into account the interests of each person, subject to the same system of priorities of urgency, in determining what would be best overall.¹⁰

Rather than making the argument for equality on the basis of a social or individual ideal as egalitarian communitarians do, Nagel advances the view that equality is a correct *distributive* principle between individuals. Communitarian political theories with an egalitarian approach see equality as a social good.¹¹ Nagel instead seeks a justification of the fair distribution of human goods without appeal to equality as ‘a condition of the right kind of relations among its members, and the formation in them of healthy fraternal attitudes, desires and sympathies’.¹² For the individualised nature of Nagel’s liberal egalitarianism presumes a fragmentation of moral value.¹³ The criterion of the moral assessment of outcomes must, in Nagel’s theory, ‘include each person’s point of view separately, so as to achieve a result which is in a significant sense acceptable to each person affected or involved’. It is the use of individualised acceptability as a criterion in the assessment of moral outcomes that distinguishes Nagel’s liberal egalitarianism from utilitarianism. For the aggregated and conglomerate nature of utilitarianism, Nagel argues, makes it ‘distinct’ from all individuals and therefore unable to be judged acceptable from an individual perspective.¹⁴

The fragmentation of value presumed by Nagel’s political theory follows on from his idea of a centreless world, just as in his epistemology the moral assessment of political outcomes relies on a move beyond individual points of view to ‘something more comprehensive than any of them though based on them’. He builds on this

¹⁰ Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 118.

¹¹ But a distinction can be made between egalitarian communitarians who think that living in a more equal society will aid an individual’s quality of life, and those who see that equality as a particular communal human good that can only be achieved through a political order. Non-egalitarian or anti-egalitarian communitarian are, of course, also possible.

¹² Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 109. Nagel’s argument is not that there is anything wrong with healthy fraternal relations! – but rather that an individualistic justification for equality is more likely to succeed.

¹³ See the chapter on ‘The Fragmentation of Value’ in Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 128-141.

¹⁴ Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 121.

concept of ‘individualised impartiality’ to justify his ‘strong’ concept of egalitarianism, which I shall discuss further in the second part of this chapter. There I will also consider how Nagel’s concepts of political unanimity and legitimacy are related to his concept of ‘individualised impartial concern’.¹⁵ But before doing this we need to consider Nagel’s fundamental criticism of rights-based theories and the social and economic libertarianism that results from them – that they narrow the scope of public morality.

1.b. Nagel and rights-based political theory

Rights-based theories appear to be equitable, with each individual’s claims treated equally. However such theories, according to Nagel, limit moral equity to an ‘equal claim against each other not to be interfered with in specified ways’.¹⁶ Whilst individual rights are rarely interpreted as absolute, a rights-based theory allows everyone some form of ‘veto’ on how others treat them. The underlying presumption of such theories, then, is that each person’s point of view is a limit on the actions of others.¹⁷ As a liberal egalitarian Nagel accepts that individual legal rights are of great importance in any political theory.¹⁸ However, the evaluation of individual moral claims on the basis of rights-based theories alone will, he argues, inevitably be narrower in scope than moral consequentialism, because our ethical obligation is limited to the principle of an individual’s ‘freedom to’ do something.¹⁹ Nagel

¹⁵ See section 2.c below.

¹⁶ Nagel believes this is because liberalism’s origins in setting limits on interference with individual freedoms has led to a tension between its ‘rights’ heritage and the impulse towards socio-economic equality. See Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, 57. The wider issues for jurisprudence that result from this tension are explained by Ronald Dworkin in his last major publication, *Justice for Hedgehogs*.

¹⁷ Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 114.

¹⁸ Nagel states: ‘I believe that rights exist and that this agent-centred aspect of morality is very important.’ And raising an issue I shall consider below, that of legitimacy, he adds: ‘The recognition of individual rights is a way of accepting a requirement of unanimous acceptability when weighing the claims of others in respect to what one may do’ (Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 122).

¹⁹ Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 115. He maintains that this is the case even if such a theory prioritised the most basic human rights, which would weight it towards those most in need. See also p. 114, however, where Nagel points out that the language of rights is used to justify people’s rights *to* things as well as the freedom *from* interference. He believes the use of the language of rights in this context actually leaves the territory of rights theory and moves into that of egalitarian political theory, for once the rights to medical care, standard of living or even life are considered, we are making decisions on the moral basis of competing priorities.

contends that a moral theory that gives no weight to the value of overall outcomes ‘cannot be correct’ because it leaves out too much that is morally relevant.²⁰

Instead, Nagel’s own moral consequentialism takes into account combined judgements of utility, and he advocates this process as a guide to the best principles on which everyone should act. But those who hold rights-based political theories deny the possibility of combining the viewpoints of individuals to form any sort of common goal. Nagel asserts that some of the most basic and commonplace overall ethical principles, such as the minimisation of harm (even harm to the rights of others), usually provide insufficient justification for overriding an individual’s independent viewpoint in many such theories.²¹ The agent-centred approach of rights-based theories, with their emphasis on limitations on actions rather than overall outcomes, can lead to minimalism in public morality and the adoption of extreme political positions. Nagel sees political libertarianism as an example of this.²² This rights-based approach, in his view, fails to take any real account of the need for reasoning about *public* morality as such:

The morality of rights tends to be a limited, even a minimal morality. It leaves a great deal of human life ungoverned by moral restrictions or requirements. That is why, if unsupplemented, it leads naturally to political theories of limited government, and, in the extreme, to the libertarian theory of the minimal state.²³

So whilst Nagel believes that in our reasoning on public matters we should not use an aggregated concept of utility that fails to take into account the intrinsic worth of each individual, he is opposed to libertarian political philosophies *based* on individual rights.²⁴ His moral consequentialism accepts the moral claims of individual rights to some extent, but only *in addition to* the claims of overall outcomes.

²⁰ Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 122-23.

²¹ See discussion Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 113-16.

²² An example of such an approach that Nagel has criticised is that put forward by Robert Nozick in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974)

²³ Nagel, ‘Equality’ in *Mortal Questions*, 116.

²⁴ See my discussion on intrinsic moral worth based on agent-neutral reasons for action in chapter 4, section 2.a of this thesis.

The priority that rights-based theories in general give to the claims of the individual encourages what Nagel describes as ‘everyday’ political libertarianism, a view more common in mainstream politics than ideological political libertarianism. Such a view also fails to take account of *public* reasons for action, i.e. the perspectives of *all* the individuals affected by political policy and programmes. In contrast, Nagel’s ‘centreless’ view precludes the privileging of an individual’s own perspective. Political decisions, according to Nagel, must be made impartially on the basis of what is best for society, taking into account the appropriate partiality of particular interest groups.

Nagel’s critique of rights-based political libertarianism can be illustrated by his theory of tax justice. In *The Myth of Ownership* he and co-author Liam Murphy maintain that in order to establish the appropriate design and implementation of a taxation system (and the associated benefits and welfare systems), we have to consider the socio-economic context of taxation policy.²⁵ We must question, they say, the idea that aspects of the economic system are ‘natural’ and do not have to be justified.²⁶ Instead we should seek the ethical justification for a taxation system on more general principles, such as what constitutes entitlement to property and pre-tax income (i.e. the justification of ownership at all) as well as the issue of the equity of the distribution of the social product between the private control of individuals and government.²⁷ We need to stand back and view tax justice in a socio-economic context, and make judgements on the correct scope and role of the state on this basis.

²⁵ Nagel and Murphy articulate a moral and political case against the libertarian conception of private property rights and for a social justice model in our understanding of taxation. What they call ‘everyday libertarianism’ is, they say, based on a myth (the ‘myth’ of ownership) – i.e. that we are entitled to our money (earned or unearned). The acceptance of this myth leads to a restricted view of what government is for. See Thomas Nagel and Liam Murphy, *The Myth of Ownership: Taxes and Justice* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), 15.

²⁶ In Nagel’s opinion the idea that certain (neoliberal) economic laws are natural is symptomatic of everyday libertarianism (see note above) and ‘its decisive abandonment would be a major transformation of the common moral consciousness’ (Nagel, *Equality*, 100). The idea of the naturalness of economic laws can be traced to the ‘social Darwinism’ of theorists such as Herbert Spencer, who inappropriately grafted key concepts in Darwin’s biological theory of evolution, such as competition and the survival of the fittest, onto 19th-century liberal economic theory. See Mary Midgley’s analysis of social Darwinism in *Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2003) (especially the first three chapters).

²⁷ See Nagel and Murphy, *Myth*, 176.

Of the state and its relationship to its individual citizens Nagel and Murphy argue:

The state does not own its citizens, nor do they own each other collectively. But individual citizens don't own anything except through laws that are enacted and enforced through the state. Therefore the issues of taxation are not about how the state should appropriate and distribute what its citizens already own, but about how it should allow ownership to be determined.²⁸

So Nagel believes a taxation system cannot be founded in any fundamental way on the concept of individual rights claimed *against* the state, as in libertarian political theories, because the state is the very framework within which the individual entitlement to property or income is to be determined.²⁹ The scope of government cannot be limited by individual rights, though the role of government maybe. The political issues of the nature and range of public services, and therefore the level of taxation needed to pay for these, become questions to be asked *after* it is accepted that the state is entitled to determine the framework of ownership rights.³⁰ This still allows for a broad range of views on the justification of taxation policy, but would re-orientate the ethical issues to be considered. As Nagel and Murphy explain:

If political debate were not over how much of what is mine the government should take in taxes, but over how the laws, including the tax system, should determine what is to count as mine, it would not end disagreements over the merits of redistribution and public provision, but it would change their form.

²⁸ Nagel and Murphy, *Myth*, 176.

²⁹ In Nagel's view the libertarian argument is ultimately incoherent because (1) it is based on the assumption that pre-tax market outcomes are just, and (2) the idea that we have an unqualified moral entitlement to what we earn in the market before government 'interferes' is invalid – not least because government laws on regulation, competition and other commercial practices are necessary for a market system and have a direct bearing on the rate of profit. See discussion in Nagel and Murphy, *Myth*, pp. 31-37.

³⁰ These are, he suggests, second-order principles once tax justice itself has been decided on. The preferred system a society may choose could be one which denied the state a significant role in poverty alleviation and combating economic inequality, but such a position could not use the 'rights' to pre-tax income as the basis for these choices. Nagel cautions against second-order principles that actually raise first-order questions about having a tax system based on social justice at all: see the discussion in Chapter 2 of *Myth* on traditional criteria of tax equity. There are, he says, what appear to be second-order principles about the implementation of a fair tax system that when applied clearly undermine *any* social justice arguments for a tax system. A good example of this is the 'benefit principle'; see Nagel and Murphy, *Myth*, pp. 16-19.

The question would become what values we want to uphold and reflect in our collectively enacted system of property rights – how much weight should be given to the alleviation of poverty and the provision of equal chances; how much to ensuring that people reap the rewards and penalties for their efforts or lack thereof; how much to leaving people free of interference in their voluntary interactions.³¹

In this particular example of tax justice we also see Nagel's assumption that government is a necessary ethical framework for both personal life and civil society. In the next part of this chapter I shall examine Nagel's conception of the moral unanimity necessary for the legitimacy of political institutions. There I shall show how he attempts to accommodate values of personal liberty and individual autonomy within the wider conception of political impartiality upon which he builds his justification for egalitarianism. Though Nagel specifically eschews an individual rights-based approach to political theory, he maintains that liberty and personal autonomy have value in any objective standard of human priorities. I shall explain below how he accommodates the agent-centred aspects of political theory with his conception of political impartiality. We shall see how despite the accommodation of individual autonomy with his egalitarianism of outcomes, there is no weakening in his political theory of the moral obligation to act for equality.

2. Equality and partiality in Nagel's liberal egalitarianism

In liberal democratic societies, the political order is a matter of collective agency which is subject to public deliberation and accountability. The function of the state is to arrange the collective life of its members. This function includes both dealing with competing claims between individual members of society, and acting for the collective good, however defined.³² In matters of socio-economic justice, however, there is more at stake than the balancing of individual freedoms and rights between

³¹ Nagel and Murphy *Myth*, 177.

³² This covers both a state providing a minimal level of collective good (i.e. security and order) and a state that may intervene more extensively in social and economic structures (the provision of welfare, public education and healthcare, etc.). See the discussion on the political obligations of strict egalitarianism in chapter 8 of Nagel, *Equality*.

competing individuals or interest groups. For liberal egalitarians such as Nagel, when deciding among political alternatives within the democratic process, the importance of letting individuals ‘lead their own lives’ must be weighed along with the aim of greater economic and social equality.³³ In Nagel’s view there is a ‘personal dimension of life where egalitarian impartiality has no place, but which interacts with the public domain to generate inequalities that raise serious issues of social justice’.³⁴ The complicating factor is the negative responsibility of the state, our collective agent. Nagel explains:

There is [no] morally fundamental distinction, in regard to the socioeconomic framework which controls people’s life prospects, between what the state does and what it merely allows. There are other areas of state action, impinging on individual rights, in which this distinction retains its moral significance, and of course it will continue to do so at the level of individual morality. But with regard to income, wealth, social position, health, education and perhaps other things, it is essential that the society should be regarded by its members as responsible for how things are, if different feasible policies and institutions would result in their being different. And if society is responsible, they are responsible through it, for it is their agent.³⁵

Nagel, then, accepts the moral imperative towards equality as part of the agenda of political impartiality, and the possibility of this significantly limiting personal autonomy, and therefore the scope of any individual entitlement, in some circumstances.³⁶ Below I shall show how Nagel applies the impersonal standpoint to politics, and how he follows this through in his justification for a ‘strong’ version of egalitarianism.

³³ Nagel, *Equality*, 101.

³⁴ Nagel, *Equality*, 120. He has in mind matters of social mobility – something he sees as a balance of ‘class and talent’.

³⁵ Nagel, *Equality*, 99-100.

³⁶ In chapter 11 of *Equality and Partiality* Nagel discusses two political options for progress towards greater social egalitarianism, the first a social democratic model of a high minimum standard of living and equality of opportunity for all, and the second ‘something more’ This second option, he says, requires ‘an exercise of utopian imagination’, a psychological and institutional transformation that would produce an ‘intergenerational shift in people’s sense of what they are entitled to’. Instead of people wanting to get ahead of others their concern would be ‘to reduce the gaps between others and themselves [...] [I]f they were near the bottom, moving ahead would be the goal; if they were near the top, they would want less, and more for others.’ Nagel, *Equality*, 126.

2.a Egalitarianism and political legitimacy

In *Equality and Partiality* Nagel describes four stages in the construction of a political theory, which are built up from the cumulative *moral* responses that result from reasoning from an initial impersonal standpoint.³⁷ At the first stage he makes an axiomatic assumption that ‘everyone’s life matters and [no-one’s] matters [...] more than anyone else’s’,³⁸ i.e. objectively considered, my life has no more or less value than anyone else’s. This assumption is central to his moral theory and a key part of his conception of moral motivation, as I have previously discussed.³⁹ Nagel does not deny the fact that some people have greater value to others (through personal commitments, attachments, desires for example), but his point is that there is a ‘baseline’ of value in the lives of individuals where everyone counts the same. It is this baseline ‘from which higher-order inequalities of value must derive’.⁴⁰

The second stage of the construction of Nagel’s political theory is egalitarianism. He maintains that ‘the right form of impersonal regard for everyone is an impartiality amongst individuals that is egalitarian’. This egalitarianism is individual and redistributive, as I have explained above. The worse off are given preference over the better off in the allocation of resources (even though those resources are a good to the better off as well as the worse off).⁴¹ Nagel’s political philosophy presumes an objective standard to the prioritising of human need and this leads, as we shall see, to an expansion of his conception of preference to include matters of equality that go far beyond basic needs.⁴² The decision to prioritise those who are worse off is an impersonal judgement, a judgement ‘one would make if one were observing the world from the outside’. But, says Nagel, the aim of ethics and political theory is not to act as ‘a powerful and benevolent outsider, dispensing benefits to the inhabitants

³⁷ My discussion here of the four stages of Nagel’s construction of his political theory is based on his explanation in chapter 2, ‘Two Standpoints’, of *Equality and Partiality*.

³⁸ Nagel, *Equality*, 14.

³⁹ In chapter 4, section 1.b, where I discussed Nagel’s understanding of our capacity to see ourselves objectively.

⁴⁰ Nagel, *Equality*, 11.

⁴¹ ‘The alleviation of misery, ignorance, and powerlessness, and the elevation of most of our fellow human beings to a minimally decent standard of existence, seems overwhelmingly important, and the first requirement of any social or political arrangement would seem to be its likelihood of contributing to this goal.’ Nagel, *Equality*, 13.

⁴² As considered in my discussion of his strong version of egalitarianism in section 2.b below.

of the world'. Instead he says it is 'to advise human beings themselves what to do, either as individuals or as the creators, supporters and inhabitants of social and political institutions'. In order to do this one has to take account of what he describes as the 'raw material' where ethics begins, namely the personal interests and desires of individuals. In the social and political context of public life this raw material includes our personal allegiances to particular interest groups, whether a particular community or national identity, collective self-interest, or indeed associations based on matters of emotion or conviction.⁴³

Coexistent, then, with our capacity to adopt the impersonal standpoint on issues pertaining to social and political institutions are allegiances, which go beyond personal and family obligations but are less than universally encompassing. Despite our communal allegiances, we can adopt the impersonal standpoint and apply this to political policy-making as well as other ethical decision-making, because we have the capacity for abstraction even when we are part of the situation being considered. But Nagel sees the mental conflict between these two standpoints (the impartial, based on our capacity for abstraction, and the partial, based on personal and communal allegiances) as one that has to be acknowledged by political theory, for 'if political theory is to tell people how to live, it must work with this juxtaposition of standpoints, and it must give an answer that is *generally* valid, and which everyone can acknowledge to be so.'⁴⁴

The fact that there is a conflict between the impartial and partial takes us to the third stage of Nagel's construction of political theory. In the search for an ideal unanimity (on the basis of which, in Nagel's view, we create political legitimacy) we need to acknowledge that some of our motives in social and political activity are the result of personal allegiances. If we are to accept, following the model of Nagel's epistemology and moral theory, that the individual's perspective within the world is of epistemological importance, then just as subjective perspectives must be accommodated within the objective 'view from nowhere', then such social and political allegiances have to be accommodated within political theory. In order to do

⁴³ See Nagel, *Equality*, 14, and note 3 above.

⁴⁴ Nagel does not think it is right for us to become merely 'instruments for the realisation of impartial values that appear from the impersonal standpoint'. Nagel, *Equality*, 15.

this Nagel proposes the use of a Kantian conception of universalisability: we should, in Nagel's view, aspire to a judgement whereby what I choose to do is something that anyone ought to do if they were in my situation. Further this should be a judgement which others can also agree leads to the right action for me to take.⁴⁵ The problem of convergence between the impartial and the partial standpoints (the two aspects of ourselves as citizens) is ultimately a matter of the credibility of any political system, for 'if we cannot through moral theory and institutional design, reconcile an impartial concern for everyone with a view of how each individual can reasonably be expected to live, then we cannot hope to defend the general acceptability of any political order.'⁴⁶

The search for unanimity is a response to the valid aspiration to impartiality described by Nagel in the first two stages of his construction of a political theory, but it is combined with the personal values and special interests of an individual's own life. Nagel does not believe that unanimity (and political legitimacy) can be achieved by the reductive subordination of the personal to the impersonal, or the partial to the impartial.⁴⁷ Rather, he maintains that we should try to see things simultaneously from each individual's point of view and to arrive at a form of motivation that we can all share, instead of simply replacing the individual perspectives with an impersonal one reached by stepping outside them all.⁴⁸ In Nagel's political theory, then, the view from the 'inside' is valid as well as the view of the 'benevolent outsider'. His criticism of the attitude of the 'powerful benevolent outsider' is not so much that they are powerful or benevolent but rather that they do not take account of the 'view from the inside'. This follows from his epistemological understanding of how 'thought from the outside' and 'thought from the inside' must be brought together.⁴⁹ How we achieve integration of the inside and the outside, the personal and impersonal, and the partial and the impartial, is a problem for Nagel and this is the issue addressed by the fourth stage of his political theory.

⁴⁵ Nagel, *Equality*, 17

⁴⁶ Nagel, *Equality*, 8

⁴⁷ His criticism of other radical egalitarian projects such as Marxism is that they do this. See the brief discussion of this in 3.a. below

⁴⁸ Nagel, *Equality*, 15-16. See also P 75

⁴⁹ As I have discussed in chapter 3 on Nagel's epistemology.

For Nagel the individual point of view remains irreducible and has value in our lives, but the demands of others mediated through the impersonal standpoint are also very important to our sense of selves as moral beings. Though claims of the impersonal standpoint in our grossly unequal world can be overwhelming psychologically, to deny them is to deny ‘an essential aspect of ourselves’. For a full recognition of the value of our own lives, then, we have to accept the ‘full force’ of the impersonal standpoint.⁵⁰ Nagel believes that individuals are faced with a dilemma when they attempt to do justice to both the egalitarian impartiality of the impersonal standpoint and the legitimate claims of personal life. The resolution of the dilemma of the two standpoints in public morality must, in Nagel’s view, be political, and I shall discuss it further below when I consider the issues of political change and the transformation of motive.

For Nagel any political resolution of the dilemma of the two standpoints in public life has to include the realisation of greater equality in society. I shall detail in the next section how Nagel makes his case for a version of egalitarianism based on political impartiality that fully represents the strength of the demands of the impersonal standpoint. The possibilities of moral and political progress towards the equality necessary to achieve a more ethically based political order will be the focus of the third part of this chapter.

2.b Nagel’s case for ‘strong’ egalitarianism

As I have already highlighted, Nagel maintains that impartiality means not only that we should have a concern for everyone’s well-being, but that in the distribution of economic and social goods we should also favour the worse off rather than the better off. He states: ‘the impartial attitude is, I believe, strongly egalitarian both in itself and in its implications.’ Rather than making empirical arguments for economic and social well-being, Nagel justifies his strong egalitarianism by making a rationalist case for a link between political impartiality and equality. Below I shall explain

⁵⁰ Nagel, *Equality*, 19-20

Nagel's claim that impartiality has egalitarian implications, and then move on to discuss how his conception of impartiality is egalitarian *in itself*.

Following the principles of his objectivist ethics, Nagel says we must give each person's life value from his/her own point of view. As we have seen in our comparisons of Nagel's political philosophy with rights-based and utilitarianism theories, his concept of impersonal value is both individual and redistributive but also fragmented.⁵¹ Value to the individual, allocated from an impersonal standpoint, has to be balanced with the value of others in our social and political decision-making. But there are politically egalitarian implications in this allocation of value because the elementary demands of well-being for each individual will outweigh the satisfaction of less basic wants or desires:

Transferable resources will usually benefit a person with less more than they will benefit a person with significantly more. So if everyone's benefit counts the same from an impersonal standpoint, and if there is a presumption in favour of greater benefit, there will be a reason to prefer a more equal to a less equal distribution of a given quantity of resources.⁵²

Nagel maintains that the moral case for a more equal distribution of resources will still be justified even if that more equal distribution results in fewer resources overall. Even if the better off were losing more resources than the worse off would gain, redistribution is justified on egalitarian grounds because the marginal utility of our consumption of resources declines so steeply once our basic needs have been met,⁵³

⁵¹ See section 1.b. above on the balance between individual wants and needs and redistributive needs. See also the chapter on 'The Fragmentation of Values' in Nagel, *Mortal Questions*.

⁵² Nagel, *Equality*, 65.

⁵³ The law of diminishing marginal utility is a key principle of welfare economics theory, but one that has been challenged, most notably by Lionel Robbins in his conception of Pareto optimality. See Hilary Putnam's discussion of this issue in the context of the place of ethics in economics, in his essay 'Fact and Value in the World of Amartya Sen', in Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), especially 52-56. Putnam makes the point that Robbins used a value neutral criterion of optimal economic functioning in contrast to the evaluative sense of welfare economics in theories such as those of A.C. Pigou.

To turn now to Nagel's argument that impartiality is egalitarian *in itself*, this rests on his view that it is not sufficient to have a 'pure idea' of concern for everyone's good; we must also acknowledge that 'the claims on our impartial concern of an individual who is badly off present themselves as having some priority over the claims of *each* individual who is better off: as being ahead in the queue, so to speak'. This attitude derives from the impersonal standpoint, but when applied to a political situation, inclines us towards 'a social ideal in which large inequalities in the distribution of resources are avoided if possible, and in which development of this possibility is an important aim'.⁵⁴

Nagel sees this 'egalitarianism in itself' as being expressed in 'individualised impartial concern'. This 'individualised impartial concern' has, he believes some relation to Rawls' conception of the 'original position' in *A Theory of Justice* – where we are asked to choose principles for a future society without knowing who we will be.⁵⁵ In such a way we have to put ourselves fully into the representative position of distinct individuals, any of whom could be me. Nagel also associates this 'individualised impartial concern' with Kant's moral principle of treating people as ends in themselves (though as he points out Kant did not draw egalitarian conclusions from this).⁵⁶

Nagel sees economic equality as only 'part of the story' when it comes to the understanding of impartiality that is 'egalitarian in itself'. For large inequalities in the distribution of resources also lead to 'stifling social stratification and class or communal oppression, inequality of political rights and so forth', and hence are a matter of wider socio-economic concern. Our equal concern for impartiality has to respond to these inequalities, 'favouring those at the bottom of the heap and those institutions which improve their status'. A more equal society is about more equal economic distribution, but also the fair distribution of goods that affect the

⁵⁴ Nagel, *Equality*, 69.

⁵⁵ See 'Rawls on Justice', in Thomas Nagel, *Other Minds: Critical Essays 1969-1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 121-136, and 'Sandel and the Paradox of Liberalism' in *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament*, especially pp. 114-119 where he analyses Michael Sandel's critique of Rawls.

⁵⁶ See Nagel, *Equality*, 66-69.

overall quality of life of individuals.⁵⁷ This wider interpretation of equality follows the logic of impartiality expressed as individualised impartial concern, he argues, because at heart it is a *comparison* between individuals with intrinsic value. We are required to reason impartially in a much more comprehensive and inclusive way than thinking simply in terms of the abolition of absolute economic deprivation.⁵⁸

Nagel's more general conception of the egalitarian obligation does not weaken the moral obligation for equality but widens its scope, as we have seen above in our discussion of his theory of tax justice. He acknowledges, however, that the moral instinct to do something about the injustices of our unequal world does not necessarily lead people to subscribe to this wider and more general egalitarianism. He is well aware that politically it is more common to achieve consensus around a more minimal welfare approach (feeding the starving and sheltering the homeless, etc.) than on his 'stronger' egalitarianism, whose criteria of quality of life are broader. However, he sees this stronger political egalitarianism as politically necessary, not least in view of the ideological effects of social and class stratification resulting from inequality, which influence motives for political change. Further, the actual progress (or retreat) of societies towards egalitarian social arrangements will affect the possibilities for the transcendence of individuality, and alter individuals' reasons for action.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Both Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have worked on integrating quality of life criteria into economic theory using a freedom-based capability approach most particularly in the field of development economics. It is an alternative to the focus on primary goods made by John Rawls. See Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (London: Penguin, 2010), chapters 11 to 14, and Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, eds., *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). Nussbaum has related this approach to Aristotelian ideas of human flourishing.

⁵⁸ See Nagel's discussion of the egalitarian principle, where he argues that it relates to people's lives as a whole and the quality of life over a whole lifetime; see also his reflection on the complex matter of the extent to which individuals are responsible for their life choices, and his discussion on influence of class. Nagel, *Equality*, 69-70; 71-73, and Chapter 10.

⁵⁹ See his comments on the moral psychology of change in *Equality*, 59: 'There is a definite tendency in liberal societies for the better off to resist the pursuit of socio-economic equality [...] this is partly due to the distorting influence on democratic politics of large concentrations of wealth but it also reflects a more general psychological disposition. It may indicate limits to how egalitarian a liberal system can be. On the other hand, it is important not to be too impressed by the unavoidable difficulties involved in any transition to a significantly more equal system, since that may evoke resistances of a much higher order than would arise if people were used to it and had their expectation formed by it.'

In his argument for the application of the impersonal standpoint to politics, Nagel makes clear the universal impartiality and equality necessary for an ethical politics. He attempts to justify political legitimacy on the basis of a Kantian conception of universalisability. This is an accommodation of the individualistic motives of the personal standpoint with the strong moral impulse of the impersonal. Unanimity, which in his view is necessary for political legitimacy, thus has an ethical base but this is hard to achieve in practical political terms, i.e. ones that also take into account socio-economic realities, for 'the vast inequalities of wealth and power which even the more egalitarian versions of such systems [ones with mutual aid, a welfare state, etc.] continue to generate are really incompatible with an adequate response to the impartial attitude which is the first manifestation of the impersonal standpoint.'⁶⁰

Nagel's model of impartiality, then, implies egalitarian outcomes for any social ordering, and his concept of the individualised impartial concern is itself a source of motivation towards more equality. The pursuit of the social ideal of equality, however, creates a tension between equality and partiality: 'as impersonal demands achieve broader and broader scope, they gradually come to seem overwhelming, and it becomes progressively harder to imagine a system which does justice to them as well as to the demands of individuality.'⁶¹ This tension is as real and serious, if not more so, than the dilemma expressed in his moral and epistemological theory between the impersonal and personal standpoint. I shall now move on to examine how this dilemma manifests itself in the public sphere as a matter of political motivation, and in the search for a life where there is greater integration of the personal and the impersonal, and the partial and the impartial, perspectives.

3. Political Progress and the Integrated Life of the Self

The desire to live an integrated life, to look for a way, as Nagel says, 'to put ourselves back together' is in the end, as we saw above, a matter of politics and the soul.⁶² The self, 'the sense of who we are, what our ends are, and where our personal

⁶⁰ Nagel, *Equality*, 57.

⁶¹ Nagel, *Equality*, 57.

⁶² See section 2.e in chapter 5 above, and Nagel, *Equality*, 16.

fulfilment is to be found', can be transformed by the moral context of our public life. Greater integration between the personal and impersonal is possible because the effects of our actions are altered by the circumstances of public life, and we ourselves are transformed by our place in it.⁶³ Moral and political progress changes the structure of the relationship between the personal and the impersonal within the self, as well as the partial and impartial in society.

'Political institutions', says Nagel, 'can be regarded as in part the response to an ethical demand: the demand for creation of a context in which it will be possible for each of us to live a decent and integrated life.' Any political theory which aspires to be ethical must, through the institutional arrangements it advocates, try to represent the strength of the demands of impersonal values whilst accepting that there is more to the moral order than this.⁶⁴

In the sections below I shall discuss some of the issues arising in Nagel's understanding of certain obstacles to the achievement of a more integrated life: the transformation of motive necessary for the realisation of the impartial, egalitarian values of the impersonal standpoint in public life, and the possibilities of achieving the egalitarian social ideal.

3.a Politics and the transformation of motive

Nagel's strong and general egalitarianism which I outlined above would, by his own admission, require a political system much more equal (in socio-economic terms) than that which currently exists in most democratic countries.⁶⁵ He makes clear in *Equality and Partiality* his political preference that the demands of impartiality be given more weight than the 'rights' of private individuals to control their own

⁶³ See the discussion on integration as the fourth stage of a political theory in Nagel, *Equality*, 17-20.

⁶⁴ Nagel, *Equality*, 20. See also section 2.e of chapter 4, above, where I discuss Nagel's conception of a 'moral division of labour' that would allow greater externalisation of impartial requirements of social and economic life than currently exists and by doing so transform the nature of civil and individual life.

⁶⁵ '[T]he kind of egalitarianism I am talking about [one which makes it necessary to accept large inequalities in order to benefit the worse off] would require a system much more equal than now exists in most democratic countries.' Nagel, *Equality*, 74.

wealth.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Nagel argues that it is ‘neither possible nor desirable’ to completely displace the personal ambitions of individual citizens through the imposition of a top-down political impartiality, or indeed to replace the primacy of private choice in any economic system of production and consumption.⁶⁷ However, individual choices and personal attachments (which are in themselves valid) result in wealth accumulation and thus create gross economic and social inequalities. These inequalities hinder the development of a society in which individuals are given the chances necessary to achieve their potential. The dilemma is, as Nagel explains, that ‘there is a personal dimension of life in which egalitarian impartiality has no place, but which interacts with the public domain to generate inequalities’.⁶⁸ For Nagel, the ‘awkward pursuit of objectivity’ in politics, i.e. impartiality and egalitarianism, leads to a growing awareness of the inadequacy of current social and political arrangements to meet the demands of the impersonal standpoint applied to the circumstances of public life.⁶⁹

Nagel believes that we are justified in intervening (in the form of positive action) to aid the creation of circumstances which enable us to all live as we should.⁷⁰ The moral claims on us as citizens to promote equality are wider and further-reaching than those of personal morality for two main reasons. Firstly, as we have discussed above, the circumstances of public life mean we have to concern ourselves with the effects of our actions on a much larger scale and with more comprehensive scope than those of private morality.⁷¹ Secondly, the state and its citizens do not just have a responsibility for how things are; they also have a ‘negative responsibility’ for the way things are if they could be arranged

⁶⁶ See discussion on rights in section 1.b above. Nagel even applies this principle to philanthropy, for it is the individual alone who chooses his/her cause and (in the case of tax-deductable charitable donations) prevents redistribution in a democratic and accountable way. See Nagel and Murphy, *Myth*, Chapters 5 (on charitable donations) and 7 (on inheritance), which deal with this issue.

⁶⁷ Nagel, *Equality*, 91. He rejects a command economy (‘the economy cannot be an extension of the state’). See also his rejection of the labour theory of value (*Equality*, 99).

⁶⁸ Nagel, *Equality*, 120.

⁶⁹ Nagel, *View from Nowhere*, 187.

⁷⁰ In *Equality and Partiality*, Nagel discusses tackling prejudice on racial, sexual, religious or ethnic grounds (i.e. negative equality of opportunity), promoting positive equality of opportunity for those without the access to advantages, and variations in natural talents. He summarises the factors influencing equality of opportunity as ‘discrimination’, ‘class’ and ‘talent’ (following Rawls), and adds a fourth, ‘luck’. It is worth noting that Nagel (following Parfit) rejects equality of treatment as an egalitarian principle, as it can be used to oppose actions that benefit the worse off.

⁷¹ As discussed in sections 1.a and 1b. above, where I considered the place of consequentialism in Nagel’s theory.

differently.⁷² In contrast to the ethics of personal conduct, in political life non-interference requires as much justification as interference. If large inequalities develop in a society because of a lack of action the state, and its citizens, are responsible.

A transformation of the motives of individual citizens needs to be encouraged in order to achieve greater social and economic equality. But such a transformation has to reconcile our reasons for acting impartially with reasons for acting impartially, the external view with the internal view.⁷³ And such a transformation has to acknowledge the plurality of reasons for action of particular individuals. Political theory cannot ignore the divisions within the self, but equally it cannot ignore the aspiration for a life with more harmony between the demands of the impersonal and personal self. There can, however, be no simple ‘takeover’ of motives in our personal lives by the impersonal standpoint. Nagel’s vision of the egalitarian social ideal is of a ‘moral division of labour’ that will apply strict impartiality to social structures but leave us to pursue our personal happiness and benefit for those closest to us in our private life.⁷⁴ His aim is for a normative division of labour in human life rather than a ‘heroic unification’.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, Nagel does believe that greater impartiality in social structures will change our individual motivation, and that we can encourage the development in individuals of an increased concern for the equality of their fellow citizens; he simply rejects the possibility of any dramatic or far-reaching changes to human nature.⁷⁶ A comprehensive modification of the acquisitive and competitive

⁷² See Nagel, *Equality*, 100 -02: ‘the acceptance of a serious egalitarian ideal would have to appeal to the notion of negative responsibility, on the part of society, for failing to arrange things differently in ways that it could [...] Every arrangement has to be justified in comparison with every other real possibility, and if egalitarian impartiality has a substantial role in justification of this kind, then significant arguments on the other side will be needed to defend arrangements which permit large inequalities to develop as a consequence of their unimpeded operation.’ Nagel, *Equality*, 100.

⁷³ ‘A theory of how individuals should act requires a theory – an ethical theory, not just an empirical one – of the institutions under which they should live: institutions which substantially determine their starting points, the choices they can make, the consequences of what they do, and their relations to one another [...] This would have to be something acceptable from a standpoint external to that of each particular individual, which at the same time acknowledges the plurality of values and reasons arising within all those perspectives.’ Nagel, *View*, 188.

⁷⁴ See Nagel, *Equality*, chapter 6, and the discussion in section 2.e of chapter 4 above.

⁷⁵ See Nagel, *View*, 207.

⁷⁶ ‘What I am imagining is a not general outbreak of asceticism. People would still want material comforts, good food and vacations in Italy.’ Nagel, *Equality*, 126.

aspects of human nature necessary to achieve the egalitarian society is, in Nagel's view, unlikely. He holds on to a hope, though, that a long-term development of the habits of equality extended to ever-widening parts of people's lives could, over generations, alter human moral psychology. We can, he says, achieve a situation where individuals will continue to desire all the good things of life but would not 'feel right' about having them if other members of society could not.⁷⁷ He maintains the ambition toward a greater harmonisation of the tensions between equality and partiality through the internalisation of impartiality as a moral motivation, so that 'the well-being of his fellow humans becomes in this way important to each person, part of what he wants'.⁷⁸

I shall now explore further Nagel's future vision of a more equal society by contrasting it with revolutionary versions of the egalitarian social ideal.⁷⁹

3.b Towards the egalitarian social ideal

Nagel is pessimistic about any significant movement in advanced capitalist societies with liberal democracies towards greater egalitarian economic arrangements in the near future. The emancipatory trajectory of democracy in some advanced capitalist economies in the modern era, notably the enfranchisement of women, the abolition of slavery and child labour and the extension of the franchise to adults of all economic classes, do give him cause for hope.⁸⁰ However, he thinks that the transformation of motive that is necessary to achieve greater economic equality is of a different order from that necessary for the changes that have taken place in response to our growing intolerance of inequality on sexual or racial grounds.⁸¹

The pursuit of the egalitarian social ideal in political life is something Nagel shares with many other political theorists. Nagel, however, draws a distinction between his own commitment to the gradual realisation of greater economic equality and deeper

⁷⁷ Nagel, *Equality*, 126.

⁷⁸ Nagel, *Equality*, 47.

⁷⁹ See Rosa Luxemburg's *Reform or Revolution* for an analysis of what this means; from Luxemburg's revolutionary socialist perspective, Nagel would be classified as a reformist.

⁸⁰ Nagel, *Equality*, 90.

⁸¹ See Nagel, *Equality*, 96-97.

political legitimacy – his *liberal* egalitarianism – and the *radical* egalitarianism of revolutionary socialism. He rejects totalising justifications (such as the Marxist philosophy of history) because they are reductive of our complex capacity as human creatures to view the world from different perspectives. He sees such theories as simplifications that arrange society according to a single set of principles without respecting the diversity of each individual's perspective. He believes Marxism is a 'seductive and dangerous vision' which includes a delayed 'harmony for the future' alongside 'political war between irreconcilable interests in the present', for under such a theory there can be no political unanimity until the abolition of classes.⁸² The pursuit of human equality should, in his view, be decisively separated from this vision.⁸³ He rejects anything less than a 'pure' idea of political legitimacy whereby the use of state power is capable of being authorised by each citizen, whilst accepting such unanimity as an ideal – 'respecting the complex realities of human motivation and practical reason'.⁸⁴

In order to achieve greater equality, then, we have to accept that no social system can be run on the motive of impartiality alone, or even that impartiality will be a dominant motive, for 'a human society is not a community of saints'.⁸⁵ Nagel instead proposes a more gradualist and limited vision of the egalitarian social ideal, a 'centreless' conception of the political unanimity necessary to justify progressive political change.⁸⁶ What is necessary for moral progress, then, is the

⁸² Seductive perhaps because of what Nagel does share with Marxism, i.e. his egalitarian critique of capitalist civil society (see Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, and his discussion of the tension between economic and civil society) and the teleology of the egalitarian social ideal.

⁸³ For a different view on the relationship between Marxism, social democracy and the egalitarian ideal see Leon Trotsky *In Defence of Marxism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970) and Trotsky's writings on the interwar years in *Leon Trotsky on Britain* (New York: Monad Press, 1973). Also James P. Cannon *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (New York: Pathfinder 1972 second edition) and *Speeches to the Party: The Revolutionary Perspective and the Revolutionary Party* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973).

⁸⁴ To explain, Nagel does not mean that each citizen has to individually endorse each state action: rather, the use of state power has to be endorsed 'not in direct detail but through the acceptance of the principles, institutions and procedures which determine how that power will be used. This requires the possibility of unanimous agreement at some sufficiently high level, for if there are citizens who can legitimately object to the way state power is used against them or in their name, the state is not legitimate.' Nagel, *Equality*, 8.

⁸⁵ Nagel, *Equality*, 72-73. I shall consider this further in the section below, when I briefly discuss supererogatory ethics.

⁸⁶ Though Nagel proposes this centreless view of political unanimity rather than the struggle of classes, he does think that the social stratification of class is significant in creating and perpetuating

creation of a political system that is more impartial and egalitarian than most human beings are, taken as whole persons. Such a system will engage with our impartiality but also take into account other aspects of our lives.

3.c Nagel's political model of self-transcendence

Nagel has a pragmatic and tolerant approach to the motivational complexity of human beings, contending that it can be accommodated through his impartial standpoint on morality, which allows for a degree of partiality.⁸⁷ He suggests that we need to 'strike a bargain between our higher and lower selves in arriving at an acceptable morality'. It is, he believes, unreasonable to expect that many people will choose to live their life solely from an impersonal standpoint. Very few people will sacrifice themselves and those closest to them for a general good, and this has to be allowed for in political theory.

Nagel does, however, consider the case of supererogatory virtue (acts of exceptional sacrifice for the benefit of others, though generally thought of as good, are not expected in the sense of being rationally or morally required).⁸⁸ He also considers the issue of personal conversion, where an individual may be able, by a 'leap of self-transcendence', to change his/her life so that his/her dominant concerns are for the welfare of others. Supererogatory acts, and such individuals as are able to make the 'leap' of self-transcendence, add to the weight of reasons for all of us to side with the demands of the moral life when it clashes with the good life. The repeated application of impersonal standards at this level points towards a more integrated life, notwithstanding the fact that it is these individuals

inequalities. What he is rejecting is Marx's philosophy of history and the conception of economic exploitation as a necessary doctrine of capitalism.

⁸⁷ Nagel holds that too close an identification of the rational and the moral is a mistake: 'the convergence between rationality and ethics should not be achieved too easily, and certainly not by a simple definition of the moral as the rational and the rational as the moral.' Nagel, *View from Nowhere*, 200. This is connected with the question of whether the choice between the moral and the good life itself should be made on a valueless basis, which he discusses in Chapter 10 of *The View from Nowhere*.

⁸⁸ He defines such virtue as 'adherence to the claims of impersonal morality prior to their modification to accommodate the normal limitations of human nature'. Nagel, *View*, 203-04.

themselves who are (willingly) limiting the demands of their own personal standpoint.⁸⁹

Despite his recognition of the importance of self-transcendence in the lives of motivated individuals, Nagel rejects the idea that ‘new men’ can emerge from any process of political reconstruction.⁹⁰ Instead his value-laden, politically pluralist preference, expressed in his conception of a moral division of labour, is for a world where the claims of the impersonal standpoint can be met by social and political institutions and then individuals will be free to devote attentions and energies to their own rich personal lives.⁹¹ We cannot know, says Nagel, the transcendence of individuality that may be possible through the combined influence of moral and political progress, but the aspiration for greater impartiality has its limit in the individual’s own perspective:

A general takeover of individual life from the perspective of the universe, or even the perspective of humanity, seems premature – even if some saints or mystics can manage it. Reasons for action have to be reasons for individuals, and individual perspectives can be expected to retain their moral importance as long as diverse human individuals continue to exist.⁹²

Our individual perspective, then, cannot be totally taken over, absolutely overcome, or made to disappear. As we shall see in the next chapter, in contrast to the practice of self-denial in the Dionysian apophatic tradition (in forms including self-abnegation, self-abandonment and self-annihilation) the practice of self-transcendence in Nagel’s objectivist morality is limited by the irreducibility of the personal standpoint epistemologically, ethically and politically. Though detachment and universality are key themes in Nagel’s moral and political theory, expressed in his idea of the impersonal standpoint and political impartiality, as we

⁸⁹ See his discussion of supererogatory virtue in *The View from Nowhere*, pp. 203-04 (in the chapter on ‘Living Right and Living Well’).

⁹⁰ ‘New men’, who would be ‘unrecognisably different from ourselves in being dominated by impersonal values, so that their individual happiness consists in serving humanity’. Nagel, *View*, 207.

⁹¹ Nagel, *View*, 207.

⁹² Nagel, *View*, 188.

shall see this perspective is substantially different from the model of detachment within the self that we find in the Dionysian apophatic tradition.

Summary

As we have seen, Nagel maintains that reconciling the two standpoints of the impersonal and personal to achieve a more integrated life is an ongoing dilemma in the self that cannot be completely solved by greater impartiality in public life and the resulting increased socio-economic equality (though significant political progress can be made from where we are now). Such a solution would, in his view, represent the reduction of a problem in one sphere, the individual, to that of another, collectivism, and hence diminish the complexity of human life.

Nagel's dilemma of the two standpoints of the personal and the impersonal is reflected in the tension he identifies between rights and equality within the political system of liberal democracy. The externalisation of the objective viewpoint that is an aspect of the development of modern liberal democracy does imply an aspiration towards greater egalitarianism, but his liberal version of egalitarianism has a conception of political legitimacy and political agency significantly different from the versions of philosophies inspired by an egalitarian social ideal. Nagel articulates the case for a more equal world where we as human beings can express more fully the demands of the impersonal standpoint in public life. He does suggest that the demands of the personal standpoint can be transformed by such a world, but maintains that the perspective of our personal self in society is irreducible and no transformation of motive that can avoid this fact.

In the next chapter I shall focus on two important areas of difference between Nagel's model of self-transcendence and the Dionysian apophatic tradition. Firstly I shall show that the conception of the 'nothingness of the self' in the Dionysian apophatic tradition, with its grounds in Neoplatonic metaphysics, presumes that the self has no space of its own. This directly contrasts with Nagel's idea of the co-existence of different spheres of human life, and the irreducibility of the perspective of the personal self. Secondly, I shall compare Nagel's ethics, based on the concept of the objective self and expressed as the impersonal standpoint in morality and

impartiality in politics, with the ethics of total transcendence of the self implied by the Dionysian apophatic tradition. By following Nagel's rationalist justification for an ethical basis for politics, however, I shall show how the central place given to reason in the Dionysian tradition can similarly lead us to egalitarian ethical and political conclusions.

Chapter 6

Detachment, Universalism and Equality in Nagel and Eckhart

In this chapter I will contrast the concept of self-transcendence in the Dionysian apophatic tradition with that propounded in Nagel's objectivist ethics and politics of impartiality, and the relationship between these and an egalitarian ethic.

I have explored the epistemological aspects of the shared intellectual history of philosophical rationalism and Dionysian apophaticism in earlier parts of this thesis, including my analysis of the history of the Dionysian tradition, where I highlighted the instrumentalist and anti-intellectual turn away from the rationalism at the centre of Dionysian apophaticism in the modern era. In chapters 4 and 5 I described significant characteristics of Nagel's rationalist moral and political theory and I will now use these characteristics, which as we have seen share many features with apophaticism, to update the metaphysical moral theory we find in the Dionysian tradition so we can reclaim a certain kind of egalitarianism as a legitimate basis for a Christian ethics. For it is a central contention of this thesis that there are particular strengths of Nagel's objectivist political theory that echo important epistemological principles also present in the Dionysian tradition. It is time now to build on those common elements we find in Nagel's philosophy and in the Neoplatonic origins of Dionysian apophaticism, and draw out their egalitarian ethical and political implications. In order to do this, in this chapter I will compare key elements in the thought of Meister Eckhart, a prominent and influential mediaeval exemplar of the intellectual stream of Dionysian apophaticism, with certain central principles of Nagel's liberal egalitarianism.¹

I shall show below how Eckhart's concept of self-transcendence goes beyond Nagel's objectivist conception in its radically dispossessive nature when I come to discussing his doctrine of the 'nothingness of the self'. I will also show how the

¹ Richard Woods has neatly summarised the 'mystical synthesis' of Eckhart as containing 'a thorough knowledge of scripture, the ancient spiritual theology of Christian Alexandria, the teachings of the Cappadocian fathers of the fourth century, and the anonymous Dionysian writings of a century later', all infused with Jewish and Thomistic elements. Woods, *Meister Eckhart*, 60. For a definition of the intellectual stream of Dionysian apophaticism, see my introduction and chapter 1 above.

personal/impersonal distinction within the self upon which Nagel constructs his ‘two standpoints’ theory is cut through by the ‘paradox of interiority’ in Eckhart’s thought, based on his metaphysics of *grunt* (ground). For though the dynamic concept of the intellect at the heart of the Dionysian apophaticism does bear similarities with Nagel’s open epistemology and teleology, the kenotic model of the self, together with a continuity between the personal and impersonal within the self implied by Eckhartian metaphysics, provides, I suggest, a different model for an egalitarian transformation of our moral and hence political motivation. I will contrast Nagel’s model of the ‘two standpoints’ with the Eckhartian conception of the self to highlight what an egalitarianism based on their common features, but without Nagel’s ‘two standpoints’ conception of the self, would look like.

An important point to note, before engaging in this comparison, is that although Nagel is not a religious believer he engages with philosophical systems and concepts used in religious traditions. These are, indeed, a central concern of his recent work on cosmology, which includes consideration of teleological explanations for the nature of the universe.² In his moral and political theory he advances compelling arguments, on the one hand for the indispensability of an ethical ground for politics, but on the other for the vital role of politics in effecting moral progression. What sets Nagel apart from many of his philosophical contemporaries is the uniquely teleological character of his thought, from his epistemology to his egalitarianism. I hope to show how the apophatic anthropology of the Dionysian tradition can supplement his case for progressive political engagement in our time.

1. Identifying Problems with Nagel’s Concept of Egalitarian Political Change

As I have argued in chapter 5, the aim of Nagel’s political philosophy is to provide a justification for, and an explanation of how we can achieve, egalitarian social change. Such change will be, in his view, a matter of ‘our unsteady progression towards moral equality’.³ But as I pointed out in the previous chapter, Nagel perceives a deep existential problem in the aspiration towards an egalitarian political

² See Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* and Nagel, ‘Secular Philosophy’ in *Secular Philosophy*.

³ ‘without ignoring the stubborn realities of human nature’. Nagel, *Equality*, 3.

ideal, which for him constitutes the central problem of modern political philosophy, namely the reconciliation of the rights of the individual with the interests of society. For Nagel the reconciliation of the ethical and political demands of being a citizen with the standpoint of the individual is essentially and at origin a matter of the individual's relation to her/himself, for 'ethics, and the ethical basis of political theory, have to be understood as arising from a division in each individual between two standpoints, the personal and the impersonal.'⁴ The problem emerges within his rationalist epistemology, which assumes introspection as the starting point of moral thinking, and from his objectivist ethics which assumes that issues of motivation are fundamentally a matter of participation in truth through reasoning.⁵ While accepting these wider epistemological and moral assumptions of Nagel's theoretical approach, in this chapter I will be contrasting the 'two standpoints' model of the self from which he constructs his liberal egalitarian political theory with the negative anthropology of the Dionysian tradition.

The association of the structure of society with the structure of the self has a long tradition in the history of political ideas, from Plato's *Republic* to Rousseau's theory of the social contract. I suggest that we can build on this association between the self and society in Nagel's ethically based rationalist politics, but working from a different model of the self. An apophatic model which, following my reading in the first part of this thesis of the Dionysian tradition as rational and orientated to the world, can maintain Nagel's rationalism and practical orientation and support his identification of the importance of the impersonal standpoint, but would allow for a different way of reconciling individuality and collectivity, but one that shares his recognition of the validity of the egalitarian political vision. I will explain in later sections of this chapter the challenge to Nagel's model of the two standpoints in the self that can be found in the thought of Meister Eckhart. We will see that the Eckhartian doctrine of the 'nothingness of the self' can form the basis for a political theory with the same egalitarian aim as Nagel's theory, but with a different anthropology. The adoption of the apophatic model of the 'nothingness of the self'

⁴ 'The unsolved problem is the familiar one of reconciling the standpoint of the collectivity with the standpoint of the individual; but I want to approach it not primarily as a question about the relation between the individual and society, but in essence and origin as a question about each individual's relation to himself.' Nagel, *Equality*, 3.

⁵ These central assumptions of Nagel's thought have been the focus of chapters 3 and 4 above.

can, I suggest, reframe two problematic areas of Nagel's thought. The first is the problem of achieving a shift to greater egalitarianism when individualistic motivations, i.e. the demands of the personal self, are accommodated in social structures and political institutions.⁶ The second problematic area is that of the integration of the two standpoints within the self. The desire for an integrated life which satisfies both standpoints in the self is part of Nagel's moral vision. However, the individual him/herself is unable to bridge this divide because although the individual has within her/himself the aspiration to fulfil the demands of the impersonal standpoint, in effect the realisation of this aspect of her/his humanity depends on changes over which he/she does not have individual control, i.e. the political structures in which she/he lives.⁷ For Nagel, unless society as a whole becomes more equal, there is no possibility of an integration that more fully satisfies the demands of the impersonal standpoint.⁸

In my exploration of these dilemmas below I will, in section 1.a, locate Nagel's objectivist justification for a universalist ethics and politics in the debate between individuality and collectivity in political theory, particularly in terms of the Kantian principle of universalisability. In section 1.b I will move on to discuss common elements of Nagel's and the apophatic tradition's understanding of the impersonal, a theme I will develop further in part 2 of this chapter when I compare the concept of detachment in the apophatic text *The Book of Privy Counselling* and the works of Meister Eckhart. In the third section below (1.c) I will move to discussing the need for integration within the self and Nagel's understanding of this as an aporia.

⁶ Nagel sees problems with both an extension of the system of social democracy (of 'the publically egalitarian and the privately partial' (*Equality*, 86), which he points out has never been politically significant in the US and is in retreat in Europe (*Equality*, 125)) and with a stronger version of egalitarianism, 'a psychological and institutional transformation which would permit innovation and cooperative production without generating substantial inequalities of reward' (*Equality*, 125). See the discussion on options in chapter 11 of *Equality*. His comments on political systems in the US and Europe, though made in 1991, are still relevant.

⁷ 'These problems of integration come with our humanity, and we cannot expect them ever to disappear. But the attempt to deal with them has to be part of any political theory that can claim to be realistic.' Nagel, *Equality*, 8.

⁸ 'Political institutions can be regarded as in part the response to an ethical demand: the demand for creation of a context in which it will be possible for each of us to live a decent and integrated life, both because the effects of our actions are altered by the context and because we ourselves are transformed by our place in it.' Nagel, *Equality*, 17.

1.a Universalisability, individuality and collectivity in Nagel

Any conflict that may exist between the personal and the impersonal standpoint, and political impartiality and the partial demands of particular interest groups, must, in Nagel's view, be resolved by universalist principles rather than by political bargaining. It is necessary, he says, for the impersonal standpoint within the self to 'come to an accommodation with the personal standpoint somehow, by seeking principles that recognise the importance of those aims in each person's life and determine how much weight they must be given in general', and this must be reflected in political and social institutions.⁹ There may be conflicts within the individual, and between individuals or groups of individuals, but in the end the ethical resolution of such conflicts depends upon the perspective from the impersonal standpoint itself, and the adoption of the principles of political impartiality by society as a whole.¹⁰ For politics to have an ethical basis, such an accommodation should be mirrored in political structures, particularly in the political principles and legal framework of individual rights and the privileges of particular groups of people in a liberal democracy.¹¹

As I have noted in previous chapters, Nagel attempts to deal with the problem of the achievement of greater egalitarianism by seeking a more reasonable balance between personal and impersonal within the individual agent. This reasonable balance has to take account of the difficulty of combining two general principles – that everyone's life is equally important and that everyone has their own life to lead – and is a matter of personal integration and social harmony. As we have seen above both general principles are based on equality, the first on the allocation of equal moral worth from the impersonal perspective, and the second on recognition that I am just one person amongst many.¹² The recognition of the first principle is achieved through the detached perspective of impartiality, and that of the second through a 'universal

⁹ Nagel, *Equality*, 39-40.

¹⁰ Nagel, *Equality*, 47.

¹¹ The characteristics of a liberal democracy being, according to Nagel, systems that include 'individual rights against interference of certain kinds, together with limited positive requirements of mutual aid, all institutionalised and enforced under the rule of law in a democratic regime'. Nagel, *Equality*, 57.

¹² 'Important as one's life may be from the inside, one is only one person amongst all those who exist.' Nagel, *Equality*, 45.

identification with the point of view of each individual'.¹³ Through our practical reasoning, then, we can fulfil the desire to live in harmony through collective and institutional structures that are in line with the structures of the self.

Nagel's attempted balancing of the demands of the personal and impersonal standpoints on an ethical basis is founded on a principle of universalisability, with an aspiration for moral unanimity that is recognisably Kantian.¹⁴ His model has general principles that encompass both agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons for action.¹⁵ Nagel maintains that not only does the principle of universalisability imply an impersonal judgement which acknowledges that each of us has our own valid reasons for action, but also that there are reasons for action that *everyone* ought to value. Nagel's approach is a modification of the categorical imperative and the Kantian universalisability principle, taking account of the impersonal standpoint implicit in it.¹⁶ Nagel seeks a neo-Kantian model of political legitimacy, then, based on principles of universalisability, including both a universal identification based on impartiality and an objective acceptance of the point of view of each individual.¹⁷ However, he does acknowledge that moral unanimity on this Kantian model is difficult to achieve, especially as a basis for political progress. For as we have seen, when (in *Equality and Partiality*) he addresses the issue of the integration of the two standpoints in the self he does so in the context of the problem of motivation and justification for egalitarian political change. He concentrates on the appropriate balancing of the principles of political programmes and policies that act for equality and those that justify a degree of partiality. Nagel maintains that the impersonal standpoint and the resulting moral impetus towards egalitarian advance that results from it cannot justify the complete 'replacement' of an individual's personal aims, and that such 'replacement' is neither possible nor desirable.

¹³ Nagel, *Equality*, 45.

¹⁴ See his discussion of his theory and its relation to Kantian moral theory in Nagel, *Equality*, chapters 4 and 5.

¹⁵ See Nagel, *View*, 152-54, and my discussion of agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons for action and the relationship to the impersonal standpoint in section 1.a of chapter 4.

¹⁶ Nagel adapts Kant's universalisability principle in the following way: 'that I can will that everyone should adopt as a maxim only what everyone can also will that everyone should adopt as a maxim'. Nagel, *Equality*, 48.

¹⁷ See Nagel, *Equality*, 47.

He is concerned to show how certain political structures that reflect the structure of the self can, however, effect moral transformations at a personal level which then lead to the possibility of further progressive political change, something I have discussed in previous chapters on his moral and political theory, including his proposals for a ‘moral division of labour’.¹⁸ But the internalisation of the impersonal standpoint necessary to move society towards a greater respect for equality itself depends on people possessing the aspiration for equality and then on the practical political possibility of achieving it (and Nagel is pessimistic on both).¹⁹ Nagel’s view of what is politically acceptable and what is achievable, then, is limited by his conception of the structures within the self.

1.b Detachment and universality: Common elements in Nagel and the Dionysian tradition

In previous chapters of this thesis I have shown that principles of ethical universalism result from the epistemological presuppositions of both Nagel and the tradition of Dionysian apophaticism. In the next part of this chapter I shall consider Eckhart as an apophatic exemplar of such universalism, and draw a comparison with Nagel’s ethical theory. I shall show that *detachment* from our personal perspective is key in both Nagel and Eckhart’s moral theories, but that Eckhart’s metaphysics assumes what can be called a ‘kenotic’ model of the self which erases the personal perspective entirely. However we will also establish that because both Nagel and Eckhart’s theories are built on common elements of the concept of detachment, I will advance my argument that the model of the self we find in the Dionysian apophatic tradition can follow the ethical principles underlying Nagel’s egalitarianism.

In my analysis of Nagel’s epistemology I have identified certain similarities in his understanding of the process of detachment in rational thinking with the practice of detachment found in the Dionysian apophatic tradition. In chapters 3 and 4 I showed how Nagel’s aspiration to widen the scope of reasoning leads him to reject both philosophical idealism and moral relativism. For Nagel it is through our reasoning

¹⁸ See chapter 4, section 2.e, and chapter 5, section 3.a.

¹⁹ See chapter 5, section 3.a

that we are able to, in some way, participate in a truth greater than our own relative position or perspective. The fact that we have a capacity to reason from an objective viewpoint allows for the possibility of moral progress, such progress being a matter of objective practical reasoning by individuals resulting in progressive social change. In this way Nagel links objectivity as an epistemological stance with the development of an inclusive moral view which can bring us closer to the truth.²⁰

In chapter 5 I discussed how Nagel works his rationalist ethics through in his political theory. For Nagel ethical politics is possible precisely because of our capacity for a detached view, the ability to stand back and imagine ourselves ‘in someone else’s shoes’. The source of moral value cannot be accessed at an intersubjective level, but rather through the impersonal standpoint from which we can construct public morality, incorporating a centreless world view where each individual has value in her/himself.²¹ Political impartiality, in Nagel’s view, is thus ‘value-laden’ rather than neutral because it is based on value ascribed from the impersonal standpoint.²² Such impersonal value has, however, to be balanced, in our social and political decision-making, with the personal value of others. It is with this understanding of moral value that Nagel makes his rationalist case for a link between political impartiality and an equality that is individual and redistributive.²³

There is, therefore, an assumption in Nagel’s philosophy that the individual’s subjective view can be subsumed to some extent by an internalisation of objectivity. For both Nagel and thinkers in the Dionysian tradition the universal perspective allows the development of the objective self, and (for Nagel) the expansion of the impersonal standpoint in the self, and hence the development of a culture of impartiality in society. It is in this way that Nagel builds from his epistemology (of the objective self) to his ethics (the impersonal standpoint), and then to his theory of the possibility of political progress. The epistemology of the Dionysian apophatic tradition also presumes an expansion of the (objective) self based on Neoplatonic

²⁰ See the discussion of this and the teleology implied in chapter 5, section 1.e.

²¹ See the discussion in chapter 4, introduction to part 2.

²² See the discussion in chapter 4, section 2.a, on the allocation of value.

²³ See chapter 5, section 2.b.

principles.²⁴ I shall show in part 2 of this chapter how Eckhart builds his ethics on this approach.

Nagel's use of the process of detachment in moral reasoning reveals his deep-rooted rationalist commitment to introspection as the necessary starting point for the development of greater (individual and collective) ethical understanding. His rationalist teleology allows for the possibility of individual and collective moral progress that goes some way towards the manifestation of the impersonal within. I suggest this is because of a teleology *within* the self (towards the objective and impersonal) which we find in both Nagel's philosophy and the Dionysian tradition (to be discussed below). However, Nagel maintains that we need an ethical basis for political change rooted in the objective nature of the self, and though he is concerned to deepen and widen our sense of moral and political obligation to other human beings, he sees the demands of the impersonal self as limited by the ethically valid demands of our personal life. Further, Nagel holds that a credible political system should reflect these limitations through accommodation of the personal perspective. Nevertheless, the impulse towards universal equality represents the manifestation of the internalisation of moral objectivity, which is expressed politically in progress towards a more egalitarian society, and such progress is necessary in order to meet the demands of the impersonal standpoint.

When I come to compare Eckhart's ethical approach with that of Nagel below, I shall show how Eckhart too identifies the demands of that which is impersonal/beyond the personal within the self as the root of our moral action. But in contrast to Nagel's division between two standpoints, the dynamic and all-embracing understanding of what is beyond the 'personal' in the Dionysian apophatic tradition overrides any impersonal/personal distinction. Eckhart presumes an inner dialectic – put in religious terms, a dynamic between the soul and the divine. This dynamic assumes a negative anthropology, for in Eckhart's model, expressed in his concept of the 'nothingness of the self', no ethical validity is given to a positive personal self (though the individual perspective is accepted as an empirical reality).²⁵ Instead, our

²⁴ See chapter 2, section 1.c, 'From *apophysis* to *apophasis*', where I discuss Rappe's view that the practices of Neoplatonic thinkers were attempts to achieve non-discursive knowledge.

²⁵ See chapter 2, section 1.b, on the 'mystical realism' of Plotinus.

personal self must be totally ‘dispossessed’ in order for us to act justly.²⁶ I shall show, in my discussion below, how Eckhart identifies a fundamental possibility in human nature of the ‘erasure’ of the ‘personal self’. While in his first major work, *The Possibility of Altruism*, Nagel grapples with question of ‘selfless’ action, in his subsequent work he concentrates on the dilemma of the two standpoints within the self – the need to reconcile the personal and the impersonal, and the limitations on viable political change that result from this.²⁷

My argument in this chapter, then, is based on the key points of convergence in Dionysian apophaticism and Nagel’s philosophy. Though the reconciliation of the standpoint of the individual with that of collectivity is accomplished differently by Nagel and Eckhart, there are similarities in certain basic assumptions of the nature of ethics and of politics.²⁸ Just as Nagel develops his moral and political theory from his epistemological assumptions, the ethics implicit in the Dionysian apophatic tradition also derive from basic epistemological assumptions. Both in Nagel’s ethics and in the Dionysian apophatic tradition we find an emphasis on the importance of the impersonal within the self, and they share a focus on the necessity for universalism and detachment. Nevertheless, their models of universalism and detachment differ in important ways that have consequences for moral and political theory. It is these differences, and their resulting ethical implications, that I shall be drawing out in my comparison of the respective concepts of self-transcendence to be found in Nagel and in the Dionysian apophatic tradition, in part 2 of this chapter.

Before embarking on a detailed account of this comparison, I need give further attention to another aspect to Nagel’s ‘two standpoints’ theory, namely that although we have different standpoints in our self, we harbour a desire for their integration.

²⁶ Eckhart’s metaphors of the *grunt* (ground) and the birth of God in the soul reflect his understanding of an inner dialectic between the detached self and the divine, and it is this dynamic that is the motor for human ethical action. Bernard McGinn regards *grunt* as the ‘master metaphor’ of Eckhart’s mystical theology. See Bernard McGinn, ‘Mystical language in Meister Eckhart and his Disciples’, *Medieval Mystical Theology* 21: 2 (2012), 214-232.

²⁷ Nagel states he has shifted position on this precise issue since the publication of *The Possibility of Altruism*. See his reference to this shift in Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 126, note 18.

²⁸ Nagel, *Equality*, 3.

1.c An irreducibility of the two standpoints and the desire for integration

Nagel aspires to a political theory which also responds to an ethical demand – ‘the demand for the creation of a context in which it will be possible for each of us to lead a decent and integrated life’.²⁹ Achievement of this integrated life depends on the reconciliation of the personal and impersonal standpoints within the self, but can only occur if we acknowledge in some way the demands of the impersonal standpoint. Our integrity is dependent on our ability to meet the demands of the impersonal standpoint in the self because that is the source of our morality.³⁰ Seen in a positive light, Nagel’s dilemma of the two standpoints only exists because, like the mystics of the Dionysian apophatic tradition, he aspires to open up and expand our understanding of the self (objective self) and its moral obligations (the view from nowhere and the resultant impersonal standpoint). It is for this reason that the process of detachment and universalism is as significant to Nagel’s ethics and politics as it will be to Eckhart.

The demands of the impersonal standpoint and those of political impartiality in Nagel’s ethics and politics require a significant degree of self-denial, although in adopting a ‘centreless’ world view we do not totally abandon our personal perspective. Indeed, as I have noted above, Nagel sees the political accommodation of partiality as ethically justified because such a total abandonment of the personal perspective is not possible. But for Nagel the impersonal standpoint is primary and fundamental, and motives arising from impartiality give us reasons for seeking greater equality and generate an increased interest in benefiting the worse off.³¹ The view ‘from the outside’ cannot, however, be allowed totally to dominate our lives, despite the fact that it is the primary source of our moral reasoning.

As I noted in chapter 5, the problem of convergence between impartiality and partiality is a matter not only of personal integration, but also of the credibility of a liberal democratic political system, which represents a reconciliation of impartial concern for others with a general agreement on how an individual can

²⁹ Nagel, *Equality*, 17.

³⁰ Nagel, *Equality*, 19-20.

³¹ Nagel, *Equality*, 66.

be reasonably expected to live.³² Nagel's model of the coexistence of the personal and impersonal standpoints within the self, and the validity of both, is reflected in his pluralist but egalitarian politics. Nagel is sceptical about the achievement of a Kantian unanimity on how we should live, and he looks instead to the reduction of the tension inherent in the coexistence of the impersonal and the personal through political change that promotes greater equality whilst recognising the need for some partiality.³³ Nagel does not, however, underestimate the difficulties of pursuing greater equality whilst allowing for partiality and the perspective of the personal self.

One aspect of this difficulty is inherent in the gradual development and internalisation of moral objectivity in the self that he thinks is necessary for political progress. As we increasingly internalise our moral objectivity, the chasm between the demands of the impersonal standpoint and the realities of social and economic injustice actually becomes even starker. The gap between the demands of the impersonal standpoint and political reality 'can be closed only by a human transformation that seems, at the moment, utopian, or by institutional invention beyond anything that is at present imaginable'.³⁴ Nagel's proposal for a moral division of labour that more adequately meets the demands of the impersonal standpoint (outlined in *Equality and Partiality*) would, he believes, go a long way to meeting our desire for integration, but it would require a much more egalitarian society than he can currently envisage.³⁵

There is a realism about human nature in Nagel's political outlook which does not stop him aiming for a fairer and more equal society, but does limit what he thinks is achievable. Nagel recognises that some self-denial is necessary for the internalisation of moral objectivity, but he thinks that examples of a high degree of self-sacrifice, as evidenced in supererogatory acts, are not applicable to the vast majority of people, and have no part to play in the construction of a political theory. Such acts, he suggests, are 'premature' in the development of humanity, the property of 'saints and

³² Nagel, *Equality*, 8.

³³ Nagel, *Equality*, 63.

³⁴ Nagel, *Equality*, 66.

³⁵ See his discussion of this in chapter 6 of Nagel, *Equality*

mystics', not those with ordinary lives.³⁶ This stance contrasts with the Dionysian apophatic tradition, where our capacity for total self-dispossession is given a much greater and universal significance, as we shall see below.

That there is a 'dilemma' between the two standpoints may, as Nagel posits, be an inherent feature of the difficulties of leading an ethical life in our unjust world, but it is also an aspect of his general philosophical outlook. We have seen in our examination of Nagel's epistemological theory that his philosophy has an open-ended character which acknowledges the infinite scope and depth of reasoning.³⁷ As I noted above in chapter 3, he criticises those philosophers who would narrow the scope and depth of reasoning because they perceive the pursuit of truth to be 'humiliating and unrealistic'. Nagel holds that although what we can say may only be partial and imperfect, and there will be many areas of uncertainty, we should still aim for the truth.³⁸ Against this open epistemological backdrop we might venture to say that the failure of Nagel's moral theory to take account of the many and varied examples of self-sacrifice evident in our contemporary society and in human history seems to go against the thrust of his general philosophical approach. This lacuna might add weight to an argument against his view that there is an 'irreducibility' to the personal perspective that has to be accommodated in moral and political theory as well as epistemology.

In section 2.c below I will elaborate on Eckhart's uncompromising view on the necessity of self-dispossession, expressed in his doctrine of the 'nothingness of the self', and consider how this can be interpreted as an alternative response to the dilemma of the two standpoints. Continuity between what appears to be personal and the impersonal within the self is assumed, rather than a division between the impersonal and personal standpoints within the self. The Eckhartian approach of the nothingness of the self, then, offers the opportunity for a different sort of integration

³⁶ 'A general takeover of individual life from the perspective of the universe, or even from the perspective of humanity, seems premature – even if some saints or mystics can manage it.' Nagel, *View*, 188.

³⁷ See chapter 3, sections 1.a and 1.b.

³⁸ See the discussion in chapter 3, section 1.a, and *The View from Nowhere*: 'The right attitude in philosophy is to accept aims that we can only achieve only fractionally and imperfectly, and cannot be sure of achieving even to that extent. It means not abandoning the pursuit of truth, even though if you want the truth rather than something to say, you will have a good deal less to say.' Nagel, *View*, 9.

because it resolves this dilemma of the two standpoints of the self within the individual *in the here and now*, through an erasure of the personal/impersonal distinction – an achievement of self-transcendence in everyday life.³⁹

Summary

Above I have identified tensions between the universal and the personal in Nagel's thought, between his teleology of progress and his conception of an 'irreducible' personal perspective, and between his conception of the personal and impersonal standpoints in the self and his acknowledgement of a desire to integrate these two standpoints. I have pointed out again that there are identifiable similarities between the Dionysian apophatic tradition and Nagel's philosophy, in particular the importance of the impersonal standpoint in the self for ethical motivation.

It is with these similarities and their common elements in mind that, in part 2 of this chapter, I will compare Nagel's concept of detachment with the concept of naked being we find in the Dionysian tradition, including Eckhart's concept of 'bare being' and the doctrine of the 'nothingness of the self'. In the final chapter of this thesis I will suggest that the resulting 'kenotic' model of the self we find in the Dionysian tradition can follow Nagel's understanding of the central importance of an egalitarian approach to ethics and provide additional opportunities for an egalitarian transformation of our political motivation.

2. Detachment, Equality and Spiritual Poverty

In this second part of the chapter I will concentrate on the positive structural similarities between Nagel's concept of the impersonal standpoint in ethics and the concept of naked/bare being and universalism in the tradition of Dionysian apophaticism, with specific reference to *The Book of Privy Counselling* and the

³⁹ See section 3.b below for a further exploration of the Eckhartian understanding of creation as a continuous and eternal process based on the ever-present incarnation of Christ. McGinn specifically addresses Eckhart's understanding of time; see Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man From Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 159-60.

works of Meister Eckhart.⁴⁰ A central point of similarity between Dionysian apophaticism and Nagel's epistemological and moral theory is their linking of detachment and the universal perspective. In my discussion of the relationship between contemplation and the concept of 'naked' being in the 14th century English mystical text *The Book of Privy Counselling*, below, I shall point out an important resonance with the way in which Nagel develops an ethics and politics of the impersonal standpoint from his rationalist epistemology of the objective self.

This conception of 'naked' or 'bare' being, which we find in mystics in the Dionysian apophatic tradition and in the consequent Christian tradition of 'spiritual poverty', was developed in an egalitarian direction by Meister Eckhart. Both *The Book of Privy Counselling* and the works of Meister Eckhart are illustrative of the connection between human reasoning in its most abstract form and a certain understanding of the self-transcendence necessary for a universal ethic. Richard Woods reminds us that Eckhart's emphasis on the process of detachment arises in the context of his assumption that service to others is necessary, and an excellent way of practising detachment, for '[l]ove in action is itself a form of self-renunciation.'⁴¹ In section 2.c I shall discuss the kenotic model of 'true' inwardness found in Eckhart. Such detachment allows us to practise 'living works', works that arise where 'the soul and the Godhead are one and where the soul has discovered that she herself is the kingdom of God'. Eckhart is clear: 'all we do outside the kingdom of God is dead'. He criticises those who do not abandon themselves and follow God but rather 'follow the self-esteem in which they hold themselves'. God, he says, is no more to be found in external observances than in sin! The function of the inner self is to practise virtue and not possess it, for 'when we act virtuously, then this is the work of love and not our own work'.⁴²

⁴⁰ *The Book of Privy Counselling* is a 14th-century English mystical work from the same corpus as *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

⁴¹ See the chapter on 'Detachment and Commitment' in *Meister Eckhart: Master of Mystics*. The process of detachment in Eckhart's thought is the key to unlock the 'wayless' way which leads to the birth of God in the soul of the just, for 'sanctification is God's work, union with God a work of grace, transformation into God the work of divine mercy'. Woods, *Meister Eckhart*, 87.

⁴² See German Sermon 30 in Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, trans. Oliver Davies (London: Penguin, 1994), 249-250. In an early part of the Sermon Eckhart explains the contrast between works that are 'external', aimed at constraining nature and those works of the inner self that are 'spiritual'. Such spiritual works, he says, 'eradicate nature'. Further 'every work of virtue takes from love its power to bring us to God. Thus St Denys says it is the nature of love to transform us into that which is the object of our love.' Eckhart, *Selected*, 242-243.

2.a Abstraction in Nagel and ‘naked being’ in *The Book of Privy Counselling*

I have shown above that Nagel’s ethical realism presumes that we have the ability to ‘think about the world in abstraction from our particular position in it’, i.e. we are able to abstract ourselves from the contingencies of the self.⁴³ This process, Nagel says, is ‘nothing further than abstraction from our identity (that is *who* we are)’,

Each of us begins with a set of concerns, desires and interests of our own, and each of us can recognise that the same is true of others. We can then remove ourselves in thought from our particular position in the world and think simply of all those people, without singling out as *I* the one we happen to be.⁴⁴

For Nagel, the process of abstraction then begins with simple facts of human existence – firstly, the assumption that other people really do exist, and secondly that I have the capacity to see myself as just another person.⁴⁵ Taking this pared-down understanding of human existence as his starting point, he develops his objectivist ethics and liberal egalitarianism. As I have noted above in my exploration of Nagel’s epistemology, the objective capacity of the mind is expressed in his conception of the ‘view from nowhere’ and the ‘centreless’ world.

For Nagel, the objective self is an aspect of the individual self, one that provides us with conceptions that can be shared despite the incompleteness of our knowledge of objective reality. Our capacity for objective thought allows us to have these shared conceptions on the basis of the authority of objective reasoning, and this authority is internal and impersonal. It is the gradual development of the objective self that leads to an internalisation of moral objectivity, and as we come to rely less and less on what is individual in us and instead rely on something else, which is also a part of us, we access a deeper part of ourselves.⁴⁶ The progressive detachment from the perspective of the individual self allows us to tap into the resources of a ‘latent

⁴³ In chapter 3; see particularly section 1.a.

⁴⁴ Nagel, *Equality*, 10.

⁴⁵ This is ‘the ability to throw[myself] into the world as a thing that interacts with the rest of it, and ask what the world must be like from no point of view in order to appear to [someone else] as it does from his point of view’ Nagel, *View*, 62.

⁴⁶ See chapter 3, section 1.b.

objective realm'.⁴⁷ This epistemological aspiration for a 'view from nowhere', then, is also a moral aspiration. The non-individual part of ourselves forms the basis of the impersonal standpoint that is central to Nagel's rationalist ethics. The gradual development of the objective self leads to an expansion of the impersonal standpoint,⁴⁸ and it is such an expanded impersonal standpoint, based on liberation from the individual perspective, that, when applied to the circumstances of public life, enables political impartiality and a motivation for greater social equality.⁴⁹

Nagel's concept of the objective self bears resonance with the concept of naked being as expressed by author of *The Book of Privy Counselling*, an English mystical text of the 14th century contemporaneous with, and associated with, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In the remainder of this section I shall explore this resonance, and show how the conception of naked being, although expressed in metaphysical terms in the mystical text, nevertheless has social and political implications; in section 2.b, which follows, I shall discuss these in the context of the ethical universalism present in the thought of Meister Eckhart. The author of *The Book of Privy Counselling* uses a pared-down concept of human existence as a way of understanding the central importance of the impersonal part of ourselves. Like Nagel, the author uses abstraction from our individual perspective as a foundation for his epistemology. In *The Book of Privy Counselling* the work of contemplation is described as beginning from our 'naked' and simple awareness of our own existence. This 'most easy work of contemplation' is described as available to the soul of the simplest uneducated man or woman. Indeed, it is something that is manifest to 'the most ignorant cow or beast'.⁵⁰ In scathing language, the writer of the *Book* criticises those who would say 'what I write to you and others is so difficult and so profound, so abstruse and so ingenious, that it can scarcely be understood by the subtlest scholar or man or woman of intellect alive'. Such a person, he says, is instead 'excessively ignorant and simple', because he is 'someone who cannot think and feel that he is – not what he is, but

⁴⁷ Nagel, *View*, 83.

⁴⁸ See chapter 4.

⁴⁹ See chapter 5.

⁵⁰ He explains that if the beasts lacking in reason can be aware in some way of their own existence, 'much more then is given to human beings, who are uniquely endowed with reason above all other beasts, to think and feel their own existence.' 'The Book of Privy Counselling', in *Cloud*, 105.

that he is'.⁵¹ The lowest level of our understanding, which he says 'some on the basis of actual experience, hold to be the highest', is to think '*not what you are yourself but that you are yourself*'.⁵²

In rejecting 'what' in favour of 'that', the author of *The Book of Privy Counselling* is suggesting that the life of contemplation (the highest form of religious practice) can be made universally and equally available to all. In this way this approach, though expressed in religious language, shares the basic epistemological assumptions of Nagel's objective self and impersonal standpoint I have described above. The author of *The Book of Privy Counselling* extends this simple approach to theological understanding, as we are urged to be 'as blind in loving perception of the being of [our] God as [we] are in the naked perception of our own being, without any ingenious searching in [our] thoughts to enquire after any attribute of his being or [ours]'.⁵³ Thus a negative theology follows on from a negative anthropology. In the subsequent chapters of *The Book of Privy Counselling* a connection is made between this 'simple' awareness and self-denial. The awareness of our own existence includes a 'desire sorrowfully to escape the feeling of yourself' and indeed to 'painfully bear the burden of yourself as a cross'.

A naked awareness of your mere existence will always follow you and accompany your doings, unless rarely, for some brief moment, God will permit you to feel himself in abundance of love. This naked awareness of your mere existence will always force itself above you, between you and your God, just as when you begin the attributes of your existence will force themselves between you and yourself; then you will feel yourself to be a most heavy and painful burden [...] then you are your own cross [...] you can see then, that you need to desire sorrowfully to escape from the feeling of yourself, and

⁵¹ 'Privy Counselling', Chapter 1.

⁵² 'Privy Counselling', Chapter 2; my emphases. The perception of this simple fact of our own existence, i.e. *that I am*, is what carries us 'gladly upwards in eagerness of love, to be linked and united in grace and in spirit to the precious being of God just as he is in himself – nothing more than that'. 'Privy Counselling', 107.

⁵³ 'Privy Counselling', Chapter 4.

painfully bear the burden of yourself as a cross, before you are made one with God in spiritual feeling of himself, which is perfect charity.⁵⁴

This ‘sorrowfulness’ of our separate existence is a recognition of our creatureliness and, as Oliver Davies has explained, ‘the implied, though forever deferred’ unity of the self we become aware of in this recognition. Our self-knowing as creatures is, Davies says, ‘the simultaneous recognition of our dependence on God in sinfulness, finitude and pride’. It is this recognition that leads to contemplation but also reveals ‘the innate availability of the self for refiguring and regeneration by God’.⁵⁵ The explanation, in *The Book of Privy Counselling*, of the soul’s journey towards God through embracing our naked being and casting off of our ‘mere and separate’ existence, has similarities with Nagel’s understanding of the objective self, though there are limits to these similarities. The objective self has, according to Nagel, a life of its own with a universal character that goes beyond the empirical self, but his presumption of the irreducibility of the personal perspective means that in his model of the self there is an inherent resistance to the refiguring and regeneration that Davies identifies.

Whilst in his moral philosophy Nagel rarely uses the language of self-denial common in Christian spiritual texts, he does discuss the price to be paid, in terms of the sacrifice of personal aspirations and interests, as internalisation of moral objectivity increases. Further, he explains in *The View from Nowhere* how the advance towards greater moral objectivity widens the split in the self between the two standpoints, and this leads to acute dilemmas, particularly with regard to ethics and personal life. The dilemma of the two standpoints is made increasingly difficult, firstly through the level of ‘moral demandingness’ of the needs of others (discussed in section 2.b of chapter 4), and secondly in terms of internal coherence, i.e. integration, within the individual between their personal and impersonal perspectives, (as discussed in part 1 of this chapter and part 3 of chapter 5).

⁵⁴ ‘Privy Counselling, Chapter 8.

⁵⁵ See Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (London: SCM, 2001), 8-9.

In Nagel's ethics the individual cannot rationally justify avoiding the demands made upon him/her by inequality and the suffering of others – s/he knows that in different circumstances s/he would be in the 'same shoes' as others who are now in need. Nagel extends this ethical principle into the sphere of politics – his concept of political impartiality and liberal egalitarianism follows from the adoption of the impersonal standpoint, as I have argued in chapter 5 above. The gradual internalisation of moral objectivity is a matter not just of the individual balancing the demands of the personal and impersonal within the self but also of a reconciliation of collective and individual values – for the dilemma of the two standpoints is described by Nagel is a matter of both *politics* and the *soul*.⁵⁶ In discussing Rousseau's understanding of the nature of citizenship as involving engagement with a special aspect of the self (and its relation to the general will), Nagel explains his own view of the reconciliation of collective and individual values:

He [Rousseau] conspicuously conceives of membership in society as involving the formation of a *special aspect of the self* – one's participation in the general will – which is not the whole of oneself and leaves the private individual free to pursue aims that are not at variance with the common good that is the object of the general will. Thus [again] the reconciliation of collective and individual values is accomplished within each individual soul, through the effect of citizenship on it.⁵⁷

For Nagel the integration between our personal lives and our lives as citizens, the reconciliation of individual and collective values within the individual, cannot take place without a change in the political order to more fully reflect the demands of the impersonal standpoint. He sees the externalisation of some form of impersonal value as central to the tradition of liberal politics.⁵⁸ This externalisation of the most impartial requirements of the impersonal standpoint 'answers' the demands of an important part of ourselves and legitimises social and political institutions. As the consensus on the impartiality of political institutions develops it becomes harder, Nagel argues, to imagine a political system which can do justice to both this and the

⁵⁶ Nagel, *Equality*, 16.

⁵⁷ Nagel, *Equality*, 56-57; my emphasis.

⁵⁸ Nagel means liberalism as in the system of political democracy, and not the hegemony of economic neoliberalism that has predominated since 1970s in the US, UK and many other parts of the world.

demands of individuality.⁵⁹ Despite the strong pull towards internal coherence in the impersonal standpoint and impartiality within his moral and political theory, Nagel maintains that the personal perspective within the self cannot be ‘let go’ – this is an epistemological, ethical and political impossibility. In line with his co-existent model of the self (the objective-subjective, impersonal-personal), Nagel advances a concept of ‘double vision’ in epistemology and ethics, which is the view from the standpoint of both the objective self with its universal character *and* the empirical self with its own personal life.⁶⁰

Whilst greater social and economic equality can facilitate a greater integrity within the self, Nagel contends that the demands for moral coherence are to be met by an acceptance of the double vision and the dilemma of the two standpoints that accompanies it. The expression of the demands of the impersonal self through impartial political institutions has, in his view, to exploit the ‘natural complexities of the self’ rather than erasing its divisions and internal differentiation.⁶¹ Nagel’s acceptance of these complexities, and the impossibility/lack of desirability of erasing the divisions in the self, contrasts with the model of the soul put forward by the writer of *The Book of Privy Counselling*, where we are exhorted to ‘let go’ of our separate existence. It is this resistance to such letting-go that accounts for the limitations Nagel places on acting on the basis of the egalitarian impulse alone, which, like his epistemology and ethics, must include the personal perspective together with the impersonal.

But just as the development of a greater moral objectivity causes a widening division between the demands of the personal and impersonal standpoints within the self, so

⁵⁹ ‘The history of liberalism is a history of the gradual growth in recognition of the demands of impartiality as a condition on the legitimacy of social and political institutions. As these impersonal demands achieve broader and broader scope, they gradually come to seem overwhelming, and it becomes progressively harder to imagine a system which does justice to them as to the demands of individuality.’ Nagel, *Equality*, 57-58.

⁶⁰ See Nagel, *View*, chapter 5, especially the section on ‘Double Vision’ pp, 86-89. And as I have noted (particularly in section 2.d), at the end of his chapter on ethical motivation Nagel rejects the sublimation of the subjective to the objective within the self through excessive impersonality and false objectification.

⁶¹ See Nagel, *Equality*, chapter 6 on the moral division of labour, especially p 53; see also my discussion in chapter 5, section 2.b. above of Nagel’s criticism of the ‘new man’ of communist theory.

the impersonal demands of political impartiality have a broader scope and it can seem that they are impossible to satisfy. As Nagel explains:

The vast inequalities of wealth and power which even the more egalitarian versions of such [liberal] systems continue to generate are really incompatible with an adequate response to the impartial attitude which is the first manifestation of the impersonal standpoint [...] even if no other system yet devised does better, that does not mean it should be regarded as a satisfactory solution; rather it is a workable arrangement which goes some distance towards accommodating the two standpoints.⁶²

To sum up, the apophatic anthropology of ‘naked being’ in *The Book of Privy Counselling* has two main features that differentiate it from Nagel’s concept of abstraction: firstly its dialectical character, and secondly its comprehensively negative nature. With regard to the dialectical aspect it is necessary to refer back to my discussion in chapter 2 on the Plotinian doctrine of the ‘double presence’ of transcendence and immanence. For it is this dialectical conception that enables the apophatic model of the self to be both ‘nothing’ but also able to access a comprehensive ‘unknowing’ beyond its empirical existence and discursive knowledge. The ‘simple awareness’ of our own existence, *that we are*, described in *The Book of Privy Counselling*, can lead us to the highest form of knowledge in contemplation. Such simple awareness is the starting point for a wider understanding of our human existence in the cosmological-historical context. As Rappe has explained, the model of contemplation in the Dionysian tradition requires a move beyond the ‘narrow confines of a historical selfhood’ in order for a larger selfhood of the soul to emerge.⁶³

In Nagel’s open epistemology, which engages positively with the unknown, we can see a reflection of this *telos* of unknowing that we find in the Dionysian apophatic tradition. The starting point of introspection, the process of detachment, and the ability to see beyond our subjective perspective represent an ambition for transcendence (and participation in truth), but one that recognises fully our

⁶² Nagel, *Equality*, 58.

⁶³ Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, 85.

contingent position in the world.⁶⁴ However, a complete transcendence of the personal perspective is not seen by Nagel as required either for the pursuit of objective knowledge, or in order to be moral. Any comparison of the process of abstraction in Nagel's philosophy with the concept of 'naked being' we find in *The Book of Privy Counselling*, therefore, has to take account of the fact that Nagel's concept of abstraction cannot lead to a full negation of the self because the concerns of the personal self must be part of that process. As I shall show in the development of my comparison below, Nagel's ethical reasoning involves a two-step generalising process. The first step, which arises directly from the impersonal standpoint, is to maintain a strict impartiality between myself and others, and between people I do and do not know. But at the next stage of the generalising process a limit is accepted to this strict universal equity because of the accommodation of the personal standpoint.⁶⁵

To illustrate further how an apophatic anthropology has continuities and contrasts with Nagel's concept of self transcendence in ethics and politics I shall outline, in the next section, how the concept of naked being or 'bare' being is used by Eckhart to develop a Christian ethic of universalism and equality.

2.b Detachment, equality and 'bare' being in Eckhart

The concept of detachment as a form of self-denial has scriptural origins in the words of Jesus: 'if anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me.'⁶⁶ This self-denial has a positive focus, for 'anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'⁶⁷ In Meister Eckhart, an outstanding and enduring example of the intellectual stream of the Dionysian tradition in mediaeval Christianity, we see an uncompromising interpretation of this gospel command. Eckhart's interpretation, like Nagel's

⁶⁴ Nagel, *View*, 9.

⁶⁵ See Nagel, *View*, 210.

⁶⁶ *The Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974); *Mark* 8.34-35.

⁶⁷ The following verse continues: 'what gain, then, is it for a man to win the whole world and ruin his life?' *Mark* 8.36 as above.

objectivist ethics, makes a necessary and vital connection between universal abstraction and moral imperatives.⁶⁸

The concept of spiritual poverty, i.e. self-annihilation, self-abandonment and other practices of self-denial that were central to the lives of mystics informed by the Dionysian apophatic tradition, is based on the Plotinian metaphysics of contemplation as ‘turning away from the world of things’.⁶⁹ Eckhart’s concept of detachment, based on this Neoplatonic metaphysics, is the key to his ethical universalism. But the focus on what is within, rather than the world of things, is not a rejection of political and social activity; it is actually the ground for our ethical motivation, i.e. our action for justice in the world.⁷⁰ Just as rationalist introspection is the starting point for Nagel’s ethical reasoning and resulting political egalitarianism, so the practice of ‘spiritual poverty’ by mystics in the Dionysian apophatic tradition can be seen as the source of motivation for social and political action.⁷¹

Eckhart rarely refers to ethical issues as such in his writings, but as Oliver Davies has explained, ‘we would be quite wrong to think of Eckhart as teaching that we can

⁶⁸ Oliver Davies gives an account of Eckhart’s intellectual formation in the German Dominican school: he was heavily influenced by Albert the Great, the first major Western thinker to attempt to reconcile Aristotelian philosophy with the Christian faith, and also by Dietrich of Freiburg. The Albertian school took up the Augustinian insights that the mind possesses depths unknown even to itself and the idea of illumination from the Divine Intellect. Eckhart’s philosophical inheritance has been summarised by Davies as follows: 1. The nature of Godself is intellect; 2. We in our own essence are intellect; and 3. There is a principle of ascent from created things to knowledge of Godself. Also important were (in echoes of Freiburg’s thought) the primacy of knowing over being, the dynamic and transcendent character of our intellectual substance, and the idea that at our core we are linked to the immediacy of God through the principle of participation in God’s divine knowledge. See Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, especially 91-93.

⁶⁹ From the ‘self-annihilation’ of Marguerite Porete in the 13th century through to the ‘self-abandonment’ of Charles de Foucauld in the 20th.

⁷⁰ Oliver Davies suggests that Eckhart’s emphasis on the inner intention of spiritual practices was an implicit criticism of the extreme ascetical practices of religious communities of women, which reflected the patriarchy and misogyny of his time rather than a path to God. See his introduction to Eckhart, *Selected*, xxxi. In addition, Dietmar Meith has suggested that as Eckhart was writing at a time (the 14th century) and in a place (Rhineland) of accelerating development of mercantile/trading capitalism, his comments on the importance of poverty and his paradoxical understanding of what makes a man rich was a message with particular resonance for many of his listeners. See Dietmar Meith, ‘Meister Eckhart on Wealth’, *Medieval Mystical Theology*, 21: 2 (2012), 233-54.

⁷¹ Though Eckhart is seen as an exemplar of the tradition of spiritual poverty in the Roman Catholic mystical tradition, as Richard Woods points out he also had an influence on the development of spirituality in the Protestant tradition (see my discussion in section 1.b of chapter 1). Woods maintains that the ideals of the ‘Gentle Way’ pursued by Eckhart’s more mystical followers, which stressed poverty, simplicity and peace, were still present after the Reformation in the Mystical Anabaptists, whose teachings would be influential on the Mennonites, the Amish brethren and the Quakers. See Woods, *Meister Eckhart*, 94.

become so united with God, in our essence, as to be free from a life of struggle and virtue lived out in the real world,' for 'although he does not dwell on this struggle, most of what he writes implies it.'⁷² Davies has explained how Eckhart's use of the term *abegescheidenheit* (detachment)⁷³ covers both metaphysics and ethical dimensions, and incorporates the traditional monastic ascetical virtues of humility, obedience and love.⁷⁴ It is because of this that detachment can be described as 'at once our likeness to God, [...] the state of our creaturely nothingness, [...] our resignation to God's will, [...] our equal love for all human beings and [...] our humility.'⁷⁵

In Eckhart the practice of detachment is similar to that of 'naked being' described by the author of *The Book of Privy Counselling*. According to Davies, in Eckhart's view we withdraw from specific being into the 'bareness of our universal human nature', and through being nothing enter into the same nature as Christ.⁷⁶ Markus Vinzent too has explained that for Eckhart, detachment from 'formal being', i.e. individual existence, the 'this' or 'that', is necessary in order to access 'virtual being'. This 'virtual being' points to the real 'I', which is '[individuals]' being in God's pure and simple being as their origin, in God's dynamism and spirit'.⁷⁷ It is this power that is the source of all human willing and knowing, ever present because of the *imago dei* within.⁷⁸ In order to participate in oneness, we have to adopt the 'naked' or 'bare'

⁷² See his discussion in Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 165-67.

⁷³ Literally, 'the state of being cut off from'. Oliver Davies argues that this expresses 'the freedom of the enlightened soul from attachment to things in the world'. Davies explains that the English term 'detachment' is used to translate '*Gelassenheit*' (self-surrender, or the Heideggerian 'releasement'). See Davies' introduction to Eckhart, *Selected*, xxix.

⁷⁴ "'Detachment'... is an idea which spans both the metaphysical and the moral/ascetical dimensions. Eckhart's use of the term therefore serves to distinguish him from the greater part of western writers, for whom the metaphysical dimension of morality is implicit rather than explicit. But it can be shown that Eckhart's *abegescheidenheit* embraces also the traditional emphasis upon humility, obedience and love, which are the foundations of the ascetical ideal.' Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 162.

⁷⁵ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 174.

⁷⁶ See Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 165-67. Davies describes Eckhart's exhortation to shed our specific (self-)definition as being 'this' or 'that', to achieve our universal human nature. This is 'bare' – a state of being nothing so that we can enter into the same nature as God.

⁷⁷ In his account of Eckhart's commentary on *Genesis*. Markus Vinzent, 'Now: Meister Eckhart', *Eckhart Review* 18 (2008), 58.

⁷⁸ When Eckhart refers to the divine image in the soul, he talks about it as origin of both the will and the intellect, for example as in his assertion that 'there is something in the soul from which both knowledge and love flow; but it does not itself know or love in the ways that the powers of the soul do.' Quoted from German Sermon 87, in Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, trans. M.O'C Walshe, vol. 3 (Shaftesbury, Element Books, 1987). See also Oliver Davies' discussion of the ground of the soul in Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 131-35, where he explains the 'something' as the mysterious thing that is beyond human explanation but is the source of all human knowledge and love.

being of inner poverty. This leads to a moral obligation to treat others ‘without distinction’, for

[w]hoever would exist in the nakedness of this nature, free from all mediation, must have left behind all distinction of person, so that he is as well disposed to a man who is across the sea, whom he has never set eyes on, as to the man who is with him and his close friend. As long as you favour your own person more than the man you have never seen, you are assuredly not right.⁷⁹

The ability to treat others ‘without distinction’ i.e. (in modern understanding) to take a universal ethical viewpoint is, in Eckhart’s thought, associated with the metaphysical stance of self-emptying which follows from the awareness of our state of creaturely nothingness. The lack of distinction between the man across the sea and my immediate neighbour is also the lack of distinction between my own concerns and those of another:

If you love yourself, then you love everyone as much as yourself. But as long as there is anyone whom you do not love as much as yourself, then you have never properly loved yourself [...] a person who loves themselves and everyone as much as themselves, is doing the right thing.⁸⁰

It is at this point that Eckhart’s linking of detachment with universalism diverges structurally from the objectivist ethics of Nagel that I have described above. This total lack of distinction between my concerns and those of others is an aspect of universalism in Eckhart’s concept of detachment which has no exact parallel in Nagel’s ethics. On first assessment, the level of self-transcendence Eckhart demands of us seems humanly impossible – how can one have such universal reach? How can

⁷⁹ Sermon 13b in *Meister Eckhart: German Sermons and Treatises*. See also German Sermon 16 in Eckhart, *Selected*, p. 179, where he says: ‘That person who is thus rooted in God’s love must be dead to themselves and to all created things so that they are no more concerned with themselves than they are with someone who is over a thousand miles away.’

⁸⁰ Eckhart, *Selected*, 176. He goes on to say: ‘Now some people say: I love my friend, who is a source of good things in my life, more than I do someone else. This is not right; it is imperfect. But we must accept it, just as some people cross the sea with a slack wind and still reach the other side.’

one be so self-abnegating? But if we analyse what Eckhart is saying, we can see that his key point is that *total* detachment of self is necessary to achieve a universal and equal love for all without distinction. As we obviously cannot be something/someone other than our empirical selves, what total detachment does Eckhart actually mean?

Bernard McGinn describes this passage about loving everyone else as much as one loves oneself as one where Eckhart's 'functional Christology' is in evidence. In his view, Eckhart's exhortation is that 'if Christ took on our universal human nature, we must love all humans universally and in exactly the same way,' an exhortation based on Eckhart's view 'that Sonship is one and the same in all the sons of God'. McGinn explains this Christology in the wider Neoplatonic metaphysical context as 'the paradoxical notion of universal and equal love for all, just as Jesus, the Incarnate Word, is the ontological bond of the process of emanation and return' and argues that it is therefore related to Eckhart's other motifs of returning to the ground through detaching/birthing/breaking through.⁸¹

McGinn contends that Eckhart saw the purpose of divine intention in taking on our human nature as an invitation to become God's son by adoption – 'that man may become by the grace of adoption what the Son is by nature'.⁸² This sonship by adoption, however, has an aspect whereby we can be transformed *in the same image* as Christ, where I may personally become God's son.⁸³ The condition for the possibility of gaining this sonship, i.e taking on the 'same image' which is Christ as

⁸¹ See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 127. His idea of Eckhart's functional Christology is an extrapolation of that of Schneider and Haas; see note 8 to chapter 6 of *Mystical Thought*. For McGinn's understanding of detaching/birthing /breaking through, see McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 131-47.

⁸² See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 117. This adoption means that a distinction is made between us and the second person of the Trinity – but we are also the same as Christ. As McGinn reads it, there is only one real Son of God, so we are 'identically the same Son insofar as we are sons, univocally speaking. From the perspective of our existence as created beings, however, we are sons by adoption and participation, analogically speaking.' McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 118.

⁸³ See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, especially pp. 120-21, where he explains this in terms of redemption: because of the distinction between *esse hoc et hoc* (Middle High German *diz und daz*) and *esse indistinctum*, redemption demands that the Word did not assume this or that person but pure unformed humanity itself. 'It is this humanity without image or particularity that the Son takes to himself. Because we too possess this humanity, his Form or Image (i.e. the very Image he eternally receives from the Father) becomes the image of humanity.' McGinn explains that Eckhart's theme, that the purpose of the Incarnation was that 'God became man so man could become God', was not new, but that he stands out amongst his contemporaries in the emphasis he gives to this 'ancient theological truth'. McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 124.

God and Man, is ‘total purity, emptiness, detachment –abandoning the *esse hoc et hoc* of created being’. This possibility is based on the *incarnatio continua* – the everlasting ‘hominification’ of God and the ‘deification’ of humanity and the universe, itself based on a *creatio continua* – continuous and eternal creation.⁸⁴

Eckhartian detachment is, McGinn says, a process that is metaphysical, ethical and mystical, present in metaphysical detail in Eckhart’s Latin works but also in his vernacular treatises and sermons. McGinn identifies as a constant theme the idea that a receptive power cannot receive a form unless it is empty or free of other forms, for intellect then ‘can understand all things because it is no-thing in itself, but the capacity to know all’. McGinn contends that in asserting this principle, Eckhart is restating the paradox of the Christian message of *Matthew* 16:25, quoted at the beginning of this section, that in order to save our life we must lose it. McGinn links this letting-go of one’s own life with divine presence and the annihilation of the created will. Though Eckhart’s sermon on poverty does not explicitly mention detachment, there are repeated references to being ‘free’ and ‘empty’ (applied to God and the soul).⁸⁵ And in the treatise ‘On Detachment’, detachment is described as superior to humility (traditionally the foundation of all the virtues), and more important than love and mercy (traditionally the summit of Christian life).⁸⁶ McGinn argues that in ‘On Detachment’, the relinquishing of all possessiveness is seen as not just another example of this letting-go, but rather a formal feature of all true virtue.⁸⁷

Davies interprets the requirement for a total detachment that allows us to love others without distinction as detachment from our self as our own possession.⁸⁸

This is not an argument for a loss of self-control, but rather an argument against a self that is unprepared to *knowingly* risk letting go. Davies suggests that there is a self-possession that is necessary for self-abandonment, and a self-awareness

⁸⁴ See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 115, as above and his general explanation of Eckhart’s Christology in chapter 6 of this text.

⁸⁵ McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 135.

⁸⁶ In ‘On Detachment’ and other works Eckhart advances the idea that detachment surpasses love because true detachment ‘compels’ God to work in us. McGinn describes ‘how absolute self-emptying “forces” God to fill the vacuum in the soul because it is really nothing else but His [God’s] own emptiness’. McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 137.

⁸⁷ See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, chapter 6, especially 136-37.

⁸⁸ ‘The Eckhartian state of detachment in the world is one of complete self-abandonment, in which the giving up of the ego, of the sense of self, and the giving up of the sense of possession are one.’ Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 170.

necessary to perform virtuous actions. It is only when we put ourselves at risk for the sake of another that we can achieve the detachment necessary for virtuous action.⁸⁹ For Eckhart, action without a dispossession of the self is not ethical – if we act from our own self our works are ‘dead’.⁹⁰

The proper origin of both our love for others and self-love, in Eckhart’s theology and ethics, is thus total detachment from one’s own perspective in order to treat everyone equally. This stands in contrast to Nagel, whose universalism is tempered with a pluralism that does not require the sort of detachment that absorbs or replaces the perspective of the self. For Nagel, as we have seen above, our personal concerns are to be accommodated in our moral reasoning and in the ordering of society. The teleological aspects of his altruism are modified by a political pluralism, i.e. toleration of those with different interests and priorities within social institutions and the legal structure of a nation-state or states. This pluralism is based on an understanding that though the impersonal standpoint is vital for our morality, the demands of the personal standpoint of individuals cannot be overridden.

In my discussion of the nature of superogatory acts in chapter 5 I showed how, in Nagel’s view, the ability to achieve total self-transcendence is a rare human occurrence and not an aspiration upon which a moral theory can be built. In his moral and political theory Nagel rejects the view that the absolute detachment of self-dispossession, self-abandonment, self-annihilation is necessary in order to lead an ethical life; nor does he see it as the necessary basis for an ethic of political change. The achievement of greater social and economic equality, though fundamental for the development of human morality, does not require an abandonment of the personal perspective.

In contrast Eckhart, following in the Dionysian tradition, suggests that without a total abandoning of the personal perspective we are not on moral ground at all. The apophatic anthropology that underlies Eckhart’s alternative approach does share both the prioritisation of the impersonal within and the universalism of Nagel’s ethics, but

⁸⁹ Davies, *Theology of Compassion*, 8.

⁹⁰ See note 42 above on Eckhart’s concept of living works in German Sermon 30, in Eckhart, *Selected*.

is based on an uncompromising conception of total self-transcendence. In the concluding chapter of this thesis I will set the contrast between this conception and the more limited rationalist approach of Nagel's objectivist ethics in a wider political context, as between what can be called a kenotic egalitarianism that allows for the possibility of a radical conception of self-denial and a liberal egalitarianism that cannot accommodate such a radical conception. But before this I will explore in more detail Eckhart's understanding of self-transcendence, specifically his doctrine of the 'nothingness of the self'.

2.c The 'nothingness' of the self and the paradox of interiority

Eckhart's model of the self is contrary to Nagel's understanding of the two standpoints within the self and his epistemological distinction between 'thought from the inside' and 'thought from the outside', i.e. the idea of double vision. As already intimated, there are several important fundamental features of the structure of the self assumed by Eckhart that are not present in Nagel's epistemology. Firstly, for Eckhart, there is no personal self that is ultimately independent of a universal (divine) reality. Secondly, he sees no fixed or stable interior/exterior categorisation within the soul/self, and there is an erasure of the personal and impersonal distinction within the self in moral action.⁹¹ These differences in structure do, to a certain extent, follow from the fact that Eckhart is a Christian thinker whilst Nagel is a secular philosopher who therefore does not associate the divine with ultimate reality. However, this distinction is not the focus of this chapter, or indeed this thesis. Instead I shall consider how an Eckhartian approach shares an ethical universalism and an egalitarian ideal with such secular philosophy.

In contrast to Nagel's double vision of the personal and impersonal self, Eckhart's approach assumes a negative anthropology – the 'nothingness of the self'. Eckhart's conception of ethical motivation is dependent on the universal consciousness and actualisation of power through God's work within us at the depth of our being,

⁹¹ Neither of these assumptions would necessarily be shared by many modern Christian theologians.

which is ‘the birth of God in the soul’.⁹² Denys Turner has explained how the ‘nothingness of the self’ was a new theme within the Dionysian apophatic tradition, emerging in the 14th century, and although this theme can be found in the work of Marguerite Porete, the Beguine of Hainault, it was Eckhart who developed this doctrine systematically.⁹³ Eckhart’s identification of the ground of the soul with the ground of God is both a statement of theology and mysticism and a statement of anthropology.⁹⁴ His apophatic anthropology gave rise to metaphors such as the ‘spark in the soul’, ‘desert’ and ‘silence’ to describe the situation of the nameless, featureless depth within the self that is the uncreated part of the soul, identical with the Godhead.⁹⁵

Though it was a commonplace Neoplatonic doctrine adopted by Christian philosophy that the soul at its highest point touches upon the divine (continued through the adoption of the Augustinian tradition of divine illumination in mediaeval Christianity), the anthropological conception of the ‘nothingness of the self’ was an innovation in the Christian mystical tradition.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, as Oliver Davies argues, this new conception in Eckhart’s theology was itself a product of a ‘radicalisation’ of Augustinian illuminationism and a continuation of Dionysian dialectical approaches in the understanding of the Intellect.⁹⁷ Davies, a modern theologian who uses aspects of the Dionysian apophatic tradition in his own work, sees the ‘nothingness of the self’ as the basis for a model of personhood grounded in the capacity of the self for its own dispossession.⁹⁸ Not

⁹² See Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 175.

⁹³ See Turner, *Darkness*, 139. Oliver Davies too agrees that this was an ‘innovation’.

⁹⁴ See Turner, who refers to McGinn’s point that Eckhart’s theology is as anthropocentric as it is theocentric. Turner, *Darkness*, 166-67.

⁹⁵ Turner, *Darkness*, 140.

⁹⁶ Indeed, as Turner points out, ‘some version of the soul’s ultimate identity with God is the common stock in trade of the whole Western mystical tradition, at least until as late as the sixteenth century.’ Turner, *Darkness*, 143.

⁹⁷ ‘The philosophical theology of Meister Eckhart was close to that of Dietrich von Freiberg, Ulrich von Strasburg and Berthold von Moosburg, and it shows the same focus upon a theory of intellect which embodies a significant radicalisation of Augustinian illuminationism,’ Davies, *Theology of Compassion*, 62. See also the section on Dietrich of Freiberg and the German Dominican school in Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, and note 72 above. Eckhart’s radicalisation of Augustinian illuminationism is also described by Turner in Turner, *Darkness*, 156-69.

⁹⁸ This potential for self-emptying is, according to Davies, the source of the ‘foundational’ social virtue of compassion. Using a kenotic ontology, Davies proposes an ethic where the self is neither subject nor relation, rather the transition between the two – ‘that is, the movement from a centred self into pure relation through the self-dispossession of compassion, which is radically ordered to the other’. Davies, *Theology of Compassion*, 266; see also chapter 1 of this text, on kenotic ontology.

only can we be dispossessed of the attachments that may keep us from loving God and our neighbour, but we can also let go of the root of all attachments, ‘the ultimately possessive desire to be a self’.⁹⁹

In his analysis of Eckhart’s nature of the self, Denys Turner has also highlighted the importance of the dispossession of the self. He explains that Eckhart’s ‘apophatic critique of desire’ implies eschewing ‘every possibility of being appropriated within some intelligible, meaningful, desirable, possessible structure of selfhood’.¹⁰⁰ Turner maintains that the Eckhartian conception of the ‘nothingness of the self’, though a new development within Dionysian apophaticism, should be seen in a wider context of Christian tradition starting with Augustine’s conception of a God so intimate that God is more interior to me than ‘I’ am to myself.¹⁰¹ Through the practice of detachment we seek identity with the ‘nameless featureless depth’ within the self. Turner explains that the aim of the mediaeval mystics of the Dionysian tradition who followed a path of mystical self-discovery was to appropriate this hidden self (the nameless featureless depth) within the conscious self.¹⁰² The *continuity* between my ‘true self’ and my empirical self, then, could be so revealed as to show that the ‘true’ self could not in the most fundamental way be mine.¹⁰³

Rejecting the possessive desire to be a self (a self that is ‘mine’) means rejecting any positive concept of an ‘inner’ or ‘truer’ self. Focusing on what is ‘within’ is the wrong sort of interiority, indeed it is most destructive, for

⁹⁹ Turner, *Darkness*, 184. Turner explains that Eckhart does not think there is a problem with human desire as such, but rather in desire’s possessiveness, which destroys the object of possession.

¹⁰⁰ Turner, *Darkness*, 183; see also chapter 7 of this text, on the apophatic critique of desire. This critique underlies both Turner’s and McGinn’s wider critical understanding of the misplaced experiential nature of contemporary ideas of ‘mysticism’ and ‘mystical experience’, discussed in chapter 1 section 2.b above.

¹⁰¹ The bare being of God is the model for the soul. The idea of God as more interior than I am is expressed in Augustine *Confessions*, trans. R. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961) X 27: ‘Late have I loved you O beauty ever ancient, ever new [...] You were within me all the time I was outside myself.’

¹⁰² See Denys Turner, ‘Eckhart and the Cloud on Detachment, Interiority and Paradox’, *Eckhart Review* 1992, 9-26. Turner distinguishes between Christian mystics such as Eckhart following a path of mystical self-discovery and those of ‘mystical self-making’ such as John of the Cross; see also his comparison of the two mystics in Turner, *Darkness*, 174-78.

¹⁰³ ‘To be a self [in the proper sense] I must retain within myself the void and the desert of detachment.’ Turner, *Darkness*, 184.

[i]t is an attachment which seeks to infill that nothingness [that unnameable abyss into which the nameless Godhead is inevitably drawn] with images of self and with 'ways' to God. Such an identity must necessarily expel God from the place which it occupies [...] any God it does affirm it must affirm in exclusion of the I which affirms it. These are the perverse, inverted dialectics of the undetached, the dialectics of the 'exterior' person who is trapped in the polarisations of interiority and exteriority so as to seek God 'within' *rather than* without. For the truly detached person there can be no such distinction.¹⁰⁴

Turner explains that for Eckhart there is no 'inner' or 'outer' within the soul; there is instead what he terms a 'paradox' of interiority,¹⁰⁵ and it is this paradox of interiority, and its implications for human action, that contrasts most starkly with Nagel's structural conception of the 'two standpoints' within the self and his balancing of the publicly impartial and the privately partial. Turner's understanding of Eckhart's paradox is similar to that of the political theologian Dorothee Soelle, who has pointed out that making a distinction between a mystical internal and a political external means an inappropriate 'privatisation' of mysticism.

I seek to erase the distinction between a mystical *internal* and a political *external*. Everything within needs to be externalised so it does not spoil, like the manna in the desert that was hoarded for future consumption. There is no experience of God that can be so privatised that it becomes and remains the property of one owner, the privilege of a person of leisure, the esoteric domain of the initiated.¹⁰⁶

In her understanding Soelle, like Turner, avoids the conventional polarisation of the active and contemplative parts of the soul, claiming instead a this-worldly mysticism for Christian spirituality, in the Eckhartian tradition.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Turner, *Darkness*, 184. Turner goes on to make the point that this is why Eckhart resists the conventional polarisation of the active and contemplative religious lives, and is able to insist on the unity of Martha and Mary.

¹⁰⁵ Turner, 'Eckhart and The Cloud'.

¹⁰⁶ Soelle, *Silent Cry*, 3.

¹⁰⁷ See Soelle, *Silent Cry*, 59-62 on Eckhart and *sunder warumbe* ('without a why or a wherefore').

Turner's proposal of a 'paradox' has to be seen in the context of Eckhart's more general metaphysics of the soul, in which the innermost part of the soul is also the hidden depth of God i.e. God's ground (*grunt*) is my ground and my ground is God's ground.¹⁰⁸ This identification of the ground of the soul with the ground of God is the basis for the practice of detachment as 'the way of achieving that nameless, featureless depth within the self which is identical with the Godhead and which is, in another way, my own identity'.¹⁰⁹ It is God responding to God in the soul.¹¹⁰ John O'Donohue, like Turner, interprets the relationship between intimacy and detachment in Eckhart's theology as paradoxical. In terms of action in the world, the detached person wants nothing and asks for nothing in order that 'he might become a place in which God can work'.¹¹¹ An 'absolute clearance' of the self is necessary for it to become 'a place for only God, in which God can work'.¹¹² As Markus Vinzent argues, 'detachment is the direct complement to the divine nature's "indistinctness" that characterises its relations to anything distinct [...] the rational creature's reaction to liberate itself from any mediation to be simply open and free for God.'¹¹³

According to Turner, Eckhart's metaphysics then has three aspects relevant to a theology of human action in the world. Firstly, there is in the end no opposition between my 'true self' and my empirical self, or between the uncreated and created parts of the soul – they are a continuum such that there is an absence of distinction between them. Secondly, the divine does not exist over or against the human. Thirdly, there is thus no opposition between spirit and flesh, body and soul, interiority and exteriority, and God and creation.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁸ McGinn explains that the *grunt* (ground) is the innermost part of the soul and the hidden depth of God. It interacts with other metaphors, for example that of the Neoplatonic concept of procession and return, and that of the 'birth of God in the soul'. This interaction leads to the idea of a dynamic movement of outflow and return as the ground becomes fecund. See McGinn, 'Mystical Language'.

¹⁰⁹ Turner, *Darkness*, 173.

¹¹⁰ In this metaphysics, mystical union (between my ground and God's ground) cannot be conceived of as a matter of 'encounter' or 'relationship' between God and the soul – because the soul in its innermost part is devoid of intention, identity and otherness. See John O'Donohue, 'The Absent Threshold: The Paradox of Divine Knowing in Meister Eckhart', *Eckhart Review* 12 (2003), 25. O'Donohue explains that in Eckhart's concept of mystical union there is no separate part of the self that represents an individual perspective. Of the ground, he says: 'there is nothing like it anywhere else in creation. It is without purpose or destination.'

¹¹¹ See Turner 'Eckhart and the Cloud', 13 (quoting Sermon 52)

¹¹² O'Donohue, 'Absent Threshold', 25.

¹¹³ Vinzent, 'Now', 56. Vinzent makes reference to Fernand Brunner, 'Maître Eckhart et le mysticisme spéculatif', *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 20 (1970), 8.

¹¹⁴ See Turner, *Darkness*, chapter 6, especially 146-47.

To consider these points in more detail, firstly, the relationship between the uncreated and created parts of the soul in Eckhart has been described as a ‘divided self’, an unresolved ambiguity, but Turner rejects such an interpretation.¹¹⁵ Rather, he highlights Eckhart’s conception of the simplicity of the soul with the metaphor of a magnet touched by a needle.¹¹⁶ The Neoplatonic principle of an internalised hierarchy within the soul is followed through in his conception, whereby ‘it is the soul’s contact and union in its highest part with God which is the power by which it coheres in the simplicity and unity of all its powers.’¹¹⁷

The second aspect is the supposed disjunction between the highest part of the soul and the created, hence temporal and embodied, self, which results from the ‘fracturing of intimacy between God and the soul’, more generally known as sin. Sin destroys our union with God *and* the unity of the soul within itself. Any theological position, then, that causes me to choose between the divine and the human, says Turner, is actually in Eckhart’s view a symptom of the disintegration of the self. It is a ‘sin-induced false consciousness which is unable to see the divine *except* as over/against the human.’¹¹⁸

The third aspect of Eckhart’s metaphysics, which manifests as a lack of opposition between interiority and exteriority, of a God ‘within’ and a God ‘without’, is best evidenced in his avoidance of the conventional polarisation of the active and contemplative parts of the soul in his understanding of the Gospel story of Martha and Mary with Jesus, and his insistence that both God *and* the soul are transcendent. Markus Vinzent points out that Eckhart’s understanding of a non-hierarchical relation between the *via activa* and the *via contemplativa*, a shift from late antique and early mediaeval descriptions, highlights the

¹¹⁵ See his dismissal of Houston Smith’s view in Turner, *Darkness*, 146.

¹¹⁶ ‘When a magnet is touched by a needle it hands its power over to the needle so that when this needle touches another with that point it attracts it and calls “come” to it. The second needle adheres to the first with its head, and the same is true of the third and the fourth, as far as the power handed over and absorbed by the magnet reaches.’ Turner, *Darkness*, 147, quoting Colledge and McGinn’s translation of Eckhart’s commentary on *Genesis* 3, 144, in Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons*, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 1981), 112.

¹¹⁷ Turner, *Darkness*, 147.

¹¹⁸ Turner, *Darkness*, 146-47; Turner’s emphasis.

importance of ethics and praxis in his theology. This non-hierarchical relation was not, Vinzent argues, just an ‘axiological inversion in the hierarchy of dignity traditionally acknowledged to the two sisters’,¹¹⁹ but represented a ‘mutual inclusion of the two, their gradual relation with Martha as the *telos* of contemplation, and action being the necessary enactment of divine detachment’.¹²⁰

To sum up, in contrast with Nagel’s conception of the two standpoints within the self, whereby the impersonal standpoint is the source of our motivation for moral action and the personal standpoint is a constraint on such action, in Eckhart’s metaphysics we see a continuum between the empirical self and the part of the soul that is the source of all moral and political action. Thus in Eckhart’s model, mystical interiority and inwardness is, because of the dialectical relationship between the soul and the divine, the origin of action oriented to the world.

Summary

In this chapter I have sought to establish that although the link between detachment and universalism is central to the ethical thought of both Nagel and Eckhart, there are important differences between Nagel’s ‘pared down’ understanding of human existence, on which his impersonal standpoint is based, and the concept of ‘naked being’ in Eckhart. In Nagel’s conception, moral and political change is driven by the impersonal standpoint, but this is limited by the personal standpoint, according to his ‘two standpoints’ theory of the self. Eckhart maintains that self-dispossession is the origin of all moral and political change. The models of the self differ, and this has consequences for their ethics. Nagel’s model of the detachment necessary for a universalist ethics and politics is based on an understanding of the autonomy of human action, whilst Eckhart predicates his understanding of the detachment necessary for our ethics on the model of God’s detachment.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Markus Vinzent, *The Art of Detachment* (Leuven; Peeters, 2011), 152, quoting M. de Gandillac in footnote 690.

¹²⁰ Vinzent, *Art of Detachment*, 151-52. See also his commentary on Eckhart’s Sermon on Martha and Mary, 158-168.

¹²¹ Markus Vinzent has advanced the view that ‘Eckhart’s thinking about detachment is not primarily concerned with human detachment but with God’s own detachment. On the basis of his philosophic-theological understanding of the detachment of the divine essence itself, the principle (*principium*), he

In the last chapter of this thesis I wish to work toward certain conclusions by building on the similarities and differences we have found between Nagel's objectivist moral and political theory and an apophatic understanding of the link between detachment and ethical universalism as seen in Eckhart's thought. Though I will not be discussing any practical policy implications of such an approach, I aim to show that it is possible to retrieve a form of egalitarianism from the Dionysian apophatic tradition, a 'kenotic' egalitarianism that would incorporate rather than reject Nagel's understanding of impartiality, but also go beyond it in certain ways. I will thereby return to, and try to clarify further, what has been a repeated contention in the foregoing chapters: that a contemporary apophatic approach can accord with the full rigours of reason as we find in Nagel's modern rationalism, and share with his atheist approach a common understanding of the language of ethical universalism and the common political goal of a more equal society.

then builds his anthropological view of the detachment of human beings.' Vinzent, *Art of Detachment*, 5.

Conclusion

Toward a ‘Kenotic’ Egalitarianism

In keeping with this thesis’ agenda and goals as outlined in the introduction, the foregoing chapters have, through intensive and strategic engagements with Nagel’s philosophy, brought a new voice and focus to bear on what has been shown to be a resurgence of interest in the Dionysian apophatic tradition for contemporary concerns. The exploration of the often striking similarities between Nagel’s model of detachment and that of Dionysian apophatic thought has yielded mutually illuminating results, not least in what we have found to be an indispensable integration of the epistemological, ethical and political domains in both approaches. What has been made clear in a new way is, on the one hand, the world-affirming nature of Dionysian apophaticism, and on the other, the ultimately ‘this-worldly’ social and political trajectory of Nagel’s epistemology, despite – or indeed as an outcome of – its ‘view from nowhere’.

To review key aspects of this: after exploring the full rationality of detachment in the Dionysian tradition in the early chapters, the thesis went on to demonstrate the significant links and commonalities in the process of detachment and ethical motivation assumed by Nagel’s moral theory and that of the intellectual stream of Dionysian apophaticism. We have seen that there are important resonances between, on the one hand, Nagel’s ‘view from nowhere’, with its corresponding impersonal moral standpoint and political impartiality, and, on the other, the metaphysical morality of the intellectual stream of the Dionysian tradition as exemplified by Meister Eckhart. We have identified significant continuities between Nagel’s moral objectivism and key elements of Dionysian apophaticism, particularly in Nagel’s understanding of the importance of detachment in practical reasoning. Nagel’s rationalist ethics and the tradition of spiritual poverty arising from the Dionysian apophatic tradition share an aspiration for an expanded and deeper moral conception of the self. In both of these approaches detachment is not a remote impersonality or aloof impartiality, but rather the principled grounding for the process and practice of our ethical motivation, based on a shared trajectory of the internalisation of moral objectivity. It is this objectivity which, as we have seen in our discussions of Nagel’s

ethical and political theory, is the source of our motivation to create a more equal society, and we have shown similarly that a commitment to a kind of egalitarianism can also be seen as implied in Dionysian detachment.

Despite these many resonances, the analyses of chapter 6 have established a vital parting of ways between Nagel's more limited model of detachment and Eckhart's radical Dionysian apophatic model. For we can distinguish between (a) Nagel's liberal egalitarianism on the one hand, which finds its rational basis in negotiating a balance or ideal equilibrium between what he sees as the intractable irreducibilities of the impersonal and personal perspectives; and (b) what we have been calling the 'kenotic' egalitarianism implied in the intellectual stream of the Dionysian apophatic tradition on the other, which finds its rational basis in the 'radical' move of erasing the 'personal' perspective altogether. Such a kenotic egalitarianism, grounded in the radical detachment of Dionysian apophaticism, is therefore also a 'radical' egalitarianism, for the self-interest of the personal perspective is completely absent from the picture. Later in this conclusion I will outline a preliminary exploration of certain basic characteristics of such a kenotic egalitarianism, but to begin with I will examine further the contrast between the radical detachment that grounds kenotic egalitarianism and the foundations of Nagel's liberal egalitarianism, and consider whether, on the basis of the findings of previous chapters, each of these egalitarian approaches can provide a mutually enhancing corrective to certain weaknesses in the other. The radical self-giving in Eckhart's apophatic ethics directly challenges the accommodation of self-interest in Nagel's liberal egalitarianism, but equally, Nagel's 'realism' in ethics and politics (a realism informed integrally by the 'personal perspective'), thoroughly rooted in reason, may perhaps be able to mount a continuing challenge to what can be acknowledged as potential dangers in the total 'erasure' of the self in kenotic egalitarianism.

1. Liberal Egalitarianism, Kenotic Egalitarianism and the Impersonal Standpoint

Nagel maintains that political progress, measured against egalitarian norms, has recast the relationship between matters of partiality and matters of impartiality in

society.¹ Nagel's proposal for a moral division of labour in our society reflects his aspiration for a greater integration of the personal and impersonal standpoints within the self and further development of our ethical motivation and behaviour. Nagel envisages a transformation of society through a greater internalisation of moral objectivity. Or more precisely, his teleological model of a historically unfolding moral and political progress toward egalitarian ends grounded in justice and fairness is fundamentally predicated on a gradual and ever-increasing relinquishing of the authority of the personal standpoint to the jurisdiction of the impersonal. This shift to the jurisdiction of the impersonal in Nagel's moral and political theory has been a primary factor in providing the opportunities for fruitful interaction between his rationalism, and the version of liberal egalitarianism it yields, and the Dionysian apophaticism underlying the Christian conception of spiritual poverty.

But it is clear that key aspects of Nagel's more gradualist conception of political change contrast with the more 'radical' kenotic egalitarian approach. A kenotic egalitarianism, following the Eckhartian dictum that God's ground is my ground, and my ground is God's ground² and his doctrine of the 'nothingness of the self',³ would seem, in contrast to such a gradualist conception, to imply an immediate accessibility to the impersonal standpoint actualisable at all moments, and in all social situations. Such an approach seems starkly at odds with Nagel's entire mature programme, which *requires* the irresolvable tension between impersonal and personal standpoints and therefore could not accommodate an 'erasure' of the personal implied by the radical self-denial of the Dionysian tradition without a structural dismantling, especially given that self-interest is integral to the meaning of the irreducible personal perspective. As previous chapters have shown, there are two fundamental reasons why Nagel's moral and political programme needs this tension. Firstly, Nagel's egalitarianism is based on a notion of equality and justice understood as fairness (in the tradition of Rawls) between and among individual free agents or persons; secondly (and notwithstanding certain 'rare' selfless behaviours for which he allows as exceptions) his 'realism' demands adherence to the view that individuals in societies or social contexts do not escape self-interest or the interests

¹ People's rights to own others as slaves, or men's right to treat women as property for example. See chapter 10 of Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*.

² Discussed in section 2 b. in chapter 6

³ Discussed in section 2. b in chapter 6

of the personal perspective.⁴ The various tensions and dilemmas faced by Nagel that we have examined above are thus integral to the operational dynamics which ground his whole programme.⁵

Despite the many resonances and similarities on epistemological, ethical and political levels, therefore, here at the root of their groundings in ‘detachment’ we seem to encounter an incommensurability between Nagel’s liberal egalitarianism and a kenotic egalitarianism. But I want to suggest that it is precisely their diverging commitments at this fundamental level that can be used as mutual challenges, each for the other, especially in serving as correctives for certain weaknesses to which each account of detachment is susceptible in its own way. It has not infrequently been argued, for example, that the radical model of kenotic egalitarianism, with its focus on a radical self-denial, is susceptible to dangerous possibilities of misuse and misinterpretation – misuse that can lead to a failure to appreciate the reality of the personal and the particular, and hence to take into account the finitude and contingency of the human condition. The weaknesses in Nagel’s liberal approach, by contrast, lie in another direction. Despite his sophisticated balancing of the personal and the impersonal in his model of liberal egalitarianism, Nagel appears to go against his own stated emphasis on the ethical demands of the impersonal standpoint by denying the prevalence and significance of the many instances of radical self-giving in human behaviour. It is to the detriment of his outlook that he can find no normative place in his programme for these most consummate, exemplary and universally admired instances of radical self-giving, and must treat them instead as mere ‘exceptions’ that can have no orientational bearing on formal ethical or political considerations. I shall consider these differing challenges facing kenotic and liberal egalitarianism below, beginning with the possible misuses and misinterpretations of the radical self-denial we find in the doctrine of the ‘nothingness of the self’.

Kenneth Leech has pointed out that certain models of apparently ‘Christian’ radical self-denial promote a compulsive religion of self-sacrifice more akin to a victim mentality, and thus represent distortions of the message of the cross. Leech

⁴ See his view on the ‘supererogatory’ as I have discussed in chapter 5, section 3.c.

⁵ See the discussion on the *aporia* of the two standpoints in the self in chapter 4, sections 2.d and 2.e.

maintains that the same distortion can work at a collective level in the paralysing effects of ‘political grief’, with the effect that under such a model of self-denial not only individuals but also communities can become ‘dehumanised people, people without identity, without life, negated, driven, all but destroyed’.⁶ Along similar lines, Mary Grey describes the damaging effect such a distorting model of self-denial can have on women, who often have self-sacrifice imposed upon them. She and other feminist theologians have therefore criticised certain models of self-denial as, in effect, justifications for the underdeveloped sense of self present in many women that is one of the psychological consequences of living in gender-unequal societies. If the ‘nothingness of the self’ is interpreted in this way it actually leads to what Grey calls the ‘female sin’ of passivity, i.e. an avoidance of responsibility, allowing others act upon us rather than taking agency ourselves. In *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and the Christian Tradition* Grey puts forward an alternative, gender-equal and inclusive model of redemption and atonement which, while acknowledging our universal human capacity for radical empathy, is informed by an embodied and relational feminist spirituality.⁷

In order to avoid these pitfalls of compulsive self-sacrifice and enforced passivity, the case for a kenotic egalitarianism needs a model of self-transcendence valid for everyday ethics and politics, one that is not world-denying, and that respects both our creaturely particularity and the fact of human finitude. Nagel’s liberal egalitarian approach assumes both a self-transcendence that is an openness to a reality beyond our understanding – the source of our ethical motivation to achieve a more just social order – *and* a respect for our individual freedom. The importance of the personal standpoint in the self and the respect for the individual rights of others in Nagel’s liberal conception of individual freedom can act as a reminder that the radical self-dispossession of Dionysian apophaticism has to be a conscious act of the individual

⁶ Leech suggests that the true message of Christ crucified is instead one of energy and fulfilment which allows the personality to be liberated in the joyful service of God. Kenneth Leech, *We Preach Christ Crucified* (London: DLT, 1994), 23-24.

⁷ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1989); see chapter 2, especially pp 17-19. In discussing whether the fundamental human sin is pride expressed as ‘self-seeking, self-assertion and self-realisation’, Grey refers to the work of Valerie Saiving Goldstein, who drew attention to the problematic understanding of the negation of the self for women whose self is underdeveloped. ‘The danger for women [...] is that this analysis [of human sin as pride] calls on them to deny what they have never experienced – a sense of self. Women are more guilty of *failing* to take responsibility, of allowing others to act on them, and for them. Passivity can be regarded as the female “original sin”.’ (17)

self. Here we can draw on the contemporary theological approaches of both Oliver Davies and Markus Vinzent, who are concerned precisely to retain a place for the individual self within an apophatic perspective, thus pointing towards a possible rapprochement between such liberal conceptions of individual freedom and the kenotic within an Eckhartian metaphysical framework.

Markus Vinzent proposes a kenotic anthropology in the Eckhartian tradition that is able to ‘ringfence’ both individuality and personal freedom, although this individuality and freedom is not based on a conception of the human self as distinct from the divine (the focus of modern philosophy and theology) but rather on an understanding of God’s indistinction and God’s detachment.⁸ Because, says Vinzent, we know God’s power is outside of ourselves and unable to be grasped by us (because it does not reside in any fixed temporal or spatial location) God is able to totally transform Godself into the common and the ordinary.⁹ Vinzent asserts therefore, following apophatic principles, that God’s immediacy (the result of God’s detachment) means that no religious institution can ‘possess’ God’s grace and salvation, for it is intimate and immediate and in its ‘purest form only resides in the individual’.¹⁰ The individual freedom of such a self then has its origins in divine causality and spiritual commonality resulting from the generative nature of God’s paternity and love and our ‘Sonship’.¹¹ Vinzent suggests that such a self does not need to differentiate itself from others, just as God does not need to differentiate Godself from the ordinary and the common.¹² In mirroring God’s generative power, such a self ‘is that fertile ground which gains itself by making room for, giving birth to, relating to and nurturing others’.¹³

⁸ Markus Vinzent ‘Neither money nor delights but daily bread: The extraordinary as spiritual temptation’, in Simon Podmore and Louise Jelstrup, eds, *Christian Mysticism and Incarnational Theology: Between Transcendence and Immanence* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp107-130

⁹ Vinzent proposes this Eckhartian dialectical metaphysic (whose roots lie in the Plotinian principle of the double status of transcendence and immanence discussed in chapter 2 section 1.d.) as the grounds for a total transformation of our daily lives in a sacramental way. Vinzent, ‘Neither money’.

¹⁰ Vinzent ‘Neither Money’, 121.

¹¹ Vinzent ‘Neither Money’, 121-122.

¹² Vinzent explains this in terms of Eckhart’s thesis of ‘shared ‘Sonship’, i.e. the fact that ‘God has generated me as His Son without any difference.’ He says Eckhart insists this radical statement is true ‘because God is indistinct. God is not one God in me and another in somebody else, one in His creatures and another in his Son, but “He Himself is in all and everywhere, insofar as he is God”.’ Vinzent, ‘Neither Money’, 118.

¹³ For ‘God’s simplicity is the world’s complexity, the self’s rationality is the other’s sensitivity’ (Vinzent, ‘Neither Money’, 118, referring to K. Flasch, *Meister Eckhart: Philosoph des Christentums* (Munich: C.H.Beck, 2010), 215-216.

Speaking even more directly to the issue before us, in *A Theology of Compassion* Oliver Davies proposes a kenotic understanding of the ethical self based on its relationality. Davies maintains that the self-dispossessive virtue necessary for relationality is actually predicated on a prior state of self-possession. The subject ‘comes to itself *negatively* and *dialectically*, precisely in the self-emptying, decentring processes of dispossession’ which take place in and through its relationship to the other. Such dispossession is, he says, the ‘internal form’ of compassion, because it is in the nature of compassionate acts that we knowingly put ourselves at risk for another.¹⁴ Now Davies – staying true to the apophatic and kenotic perspective – accords an ethical primacy to the full self-dispossession implicit in his account of compassion, in stark contrast to Nagel’s view of such acts as ‘exceptional’ and thus as acts which, while admirable, cannot have any normative place in an ethical (or political) framework. Indeed, following Martha Nussbaum, Davies goes so far as to suggest – and now in strong resonance with Eckhart’s claim that unless we are prepared to risk a full self-dispossession we cannot be truly moral¹⁵ – that without an understanding of compassion as a ‘point of unsurpassable meaning’ society would cease to exist in any form of harmony.¹⁶ There is not scope to go further into this particular discussion here. But the point of drawing on Davies and Vinzent here has been to acknowledge and emphasise that Nagel’s ‘realism’ concerning the irreducibility of the personal perspective can act as an important challenge and reminder that any contemporary apophatic or kenotic enterprise needs to articulate the self-dispossession at its core in ways that do not diminish the continuing importance of the personal and particular. Davies and Vinzent offer us two provisional examples of how this is achievable without sacrificing the primacy of the apophatic, kenotic and genuinely ‘altruistic’ theological commitment.

¹⁴ Davies, *Theology of Compassion*, Introduction, xx. Also, ‘when we do this we are then ‘made aware of the fundamental determination of our own existence as a self that is grounded in the relation to the finite other, in which relation it discovers the further horizon of possibility as the encounter with an Other both infinite and personal’ (p. 22), for ‘in the inner and outer forms of self-transcendence intrinsic to compassion there is a combination of the infinite and the particular in our expectation of encounter with the other’ (p. 231).

¹⁵ See the discussion of self-dispossession in chapter 6, section 2.c.

¹⁶ Martha Nussbaum, ‘Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion’, *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13:1 (1996), 27-58.

But just as the irreducibility of the personal perspective in Nagel's qualified detachment can serve in the one direction as such a corrective challenge for apophatic approaches, so also the full self-dispossession found in the radical detachment of the apophatic/kenotic view can serve as an crucial point of orientation for the impersonal perspective in Nagel. As already acknowledged, we can grant that for the integrity of his own particular moral and political programme, Nagel cannot incorporate the self-dispossessive demand of the kenotic as something *structural*, for the simple reason that his broader programme fundamentally requires the tension between impersonal and personal. But in granting this we must not lose sight of one of the most central features of Nagel's reasoning in its aspirations toward objectivity and universality. For the fact remains that, despite the irreducibility of the personal perspective, the fundamental driver in his gradualist teleological vision of an increasingly egalitarian society, and the basis and criterion for any genuinely principled change toward the universal egalitarian goal, does not derive from the personal perspective but solely from the impersonal. Although the personal perspective must always be 'factored in' as (for Nagel) irreducible, it remains the case that it is the *impersonal* perspective that not only does all the work, i.e. engenders all of the universal principles of egalitarianism, but also provides the sole and essential impetus and motivation for moral and politically egalitarian purposes.

It is the *rational* primacy of the impersonal perspective here (as the sole, universal principled perspective for Nagel's egalitarianism) that brings us to the essential contribution that the apophatic or kenotic approach is able to make for Nagel. For the impersonal, in order to be genuine and authentically motivating, needs a source of orientation which can and must be *fully* dispossessive: a point of orientation against which Nagel's impersonal perspective can measure itself and be held to account. And it is precisely such an orientation that the apophatic or kenotic approach, grounded in self-giving love, can provide. It provides this, moreover, not simply by pointing 'evidentially' to particular examples of selfless sacrifice, but rather in a rationally structured way = a way which indeed includes within its remit all the cases of supererogatory behaviour that Nagel is forced to exclude from consideration as 'exceptional', i.e. not rationally or morally required. The apophatic/kenotic approach instead makes them exemplars of a fully rationally grounded orientation.

Nagel himself needs such a ‘purified’ point of reference as a source of *orientation* for the ethical principles derived from the impersonal standpoint, even if this cannot be structurally basic for his egalitarian programme as a whole, which requires the tension with the personal perspective. What this suggests, further, is that there may be a significantly more natural and critically necessary resonance between Nagel’s early work (especially *The Possibility of Altruism*) and the perspectives of his later work which have been our focus in this thesis – perhaps more than Nagel himself has been able or willing to admit, though he does acknowledge that he has shifted his position on this fundamental aspect of his ethical theory.¹⁷

As I have already noted, the working out of the broader political parameters of kenotic egalitarianism and the specific content and nature of the political change it would promote is beyond the scope of this thesis. Indeed, over and above the key findings and achievements of its explorations in themselves, one might say that the thesis acts as a kind of ‘prolegomenon’ to such a study. But one aspect of what this thesis has been able to achieve is to lay bare in a new way, through a protracted exploration of these different kinds of detachment, a fundamental reason why self-emptying love (which grounds Eckhart’s ‘radical’ detachment) is so difficult to accommodate in contemporary political discussions. For a kenotic egalitarianism implies a political ‘disinterestedness’ that on the face of it does not easily avail itself of structures of political power. It is true that the paucity of engagement with love in contemporary political discussions has begun to be seen by some as a vital weakness of our contemporary political milieu, giving rise to important treatments of this matter by influential scholars, notable among them Martha Nussbaum’s recent *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*.¹⁸ The fuller development of a kenotic egalitarianism would follow such leads, but would pursue the issue not primarily from affective or emotional perspectives, as Nussbaum does (however important and necessary this is in its own right), but rather on the basis of the rational grounding of the apophatic understanding of self-emptying love as established in this thesis. Again, although such a fuller exploration of kenotic

¹⁷ See footnote 18 on p. 126 of his article ‘Equality’ (106-127) in *Mortal Questions* where, referring to the discussion in the text of the replacement or absorption of personal concerns by impersonal ones he says ‘In this respect my present view differs from the one in *The Possibility of Altruism*’

¹⁸ Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). The opening chapter of this is titled ‘A Problem in the History of Liberalism’.

egalitarianism is beyond our scope here (a proper consideration of it would need to be the subject of a separate lengthy study) we can nevertheless, based on the findings of this thesis, now consider briefly and in a provisional and preliminary way certain key characteristics that such a kind of egalitarianism might manifest.

2. Characteristics of a Kenotic Egalitarianism

A kenotic egalitarianism would in the first place need to be pursued as a political ‘negative way’ – that is, proceeding along the lines of an *unpowering* which would parallel the ‘unknowing’ of Dionysian apophatic epistemology. In other words, it would not begin from a liberal conception of human rights based on individual autonomy. It would rather prioritise human vulnerabilities and powerlessness, in line with theologians such as Edward Schillebeeckx.¹⁹ Schillebeeckx has argued for the ethical as the ‘hinge and link’ between the mystical and the political dimensions of Christian faith, and importantly sees contemporary experiences of meaninglessness, of injustice and innocent suffering as having revelatory significance.²⁰ For Schillebeeckx, the ‘political form of the Christian love of God and neighbour [...] knows the same asceticism and self-emptying, the same suffering and the same dark nights and losing itself in the other as was once the case in contemplative mysticism.’²¹ Such love is ‘possible not just in forms of silence and rest, inwardness and contemplation, but also in hard prophetic struggle’.²²

Secondly, a kenotic egalitarianism would need to engage intensively with the fuller meaning and development of the ‘expanded’ and ‘true’ self, as discussed in this thesis – that is, the self aspired to beyond what Rappe has called our ‘historical selfhood’.²³ This again would not be a matter of seeking the right balance between personal and impersonal perspectives within the self mirrored in society, as it is in

¹⁹ Schillebeeckx’s theological and philosophical approach is however of a different order than the philosophical rationalism that has formed the parameters of this thesis.

²⁰ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus in Our Western Culture: Mysticism, Ethics and Politics*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press 1987), 48.

²¹ Schillebeeckx *Jesus*, 74. See his discussion of ‘The theological or mystical dimensions in political form’, 70-75 for his rejection of dualism in love of God and love of neighbour. He also rejects the classical theological definition of ‘God in himself’ and ‘God for us’. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 25.

²² Schillebeeckx *Jesus*, 71. See also his view that political love is the historically urgent form of contemporary holiness Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 72.

²³ See section in chapter 6 and the discussion of the Plotinian model of the self in chapter 2, particularly section 1.d on the double status of transcendence and immanence.

Nagel's theory; it would rather be a search for social structures through which the continuity between the 'true self' and the historical/empirical self would be established.²⁴

A fuller development of a kenotic egalitarianism would call, thirdly, for the exploration of a new and wider understanding of 'realism': not a realism as in Nagel, which is derived from the observation of what is *universally actual* (i.e., for Nagel, the presence of the self-interested personal perspective in all 'realistic' considerations of ethics and politics), but rather a realism of what is *universally actualisable*, or universally possible to actualise. It would accordingly need to seriously consider claims such as that of Dorothee Soelle that 'we are all mystics'. It would explore in critical depth her call for a democratic mysticism which would 'reopen the door to the mystic sensibility that's within all of us, [...] dig it out from under the debris of trivia – from its self-trivialisation if you like'.²⁵

In my analysis of the intellectual stream of Dionysian tradition apophaticism we saw that Denys Turner and Bernard McGinn share the view that there is a mystical element within all Christian spiritual practices.²⁶ Developing such an understanding of mysticism as a dynamic within our *ordinary* Christian *lives* would necessitate a rejection of the view that it is a special endowment reserved for a chosen or 'gifted' saintly few and instead recognise that it is universally possible to actualise. The development of such an 'ordinary' mysticism would not be, then, to replace or overcome the realism of the universally actual (i.e. the fact that humans generally do not escape self-interest in their actions and therefore that a rational politics must deal with this reality) with a realism of the universally actualisable. A realism of the universally actualisable, in other words, would not be 'utopian'; it would instead operate within the realism of the universally actual but according to the rational principles of its radically self-dispossessive ground.

²⁴ See the discussion of Turner's explanation of the 'paradox of interiority' in Eckhart's theory in section 2.c. of chapter 6. See also Turner, *Darkness*, 184, where he explains how Eckhart (and other mystics in the Dionysian tradition) were keen to show the continuity between the empirical and 'true' self.

²⁵ Soelle, *Silent Cry*, 301-02.

²⁶ See the discussion of Denys Turner and Bernard McGinn's analysis that Dionysian apophaticism is a mysticism of the ordinary in sections 2.b and 2.c of chapter 1. See also Introduction, note 20.

This insight has echoes of the intermingling of the heavenly and earthly cities in Augustine. But more specifically relevant to our particular purposes, Schillebeeckx (whose account of the ethical as the hinge and link between the apophatic or mystical and the political shares many of the same concerns as Soelle in building a democratic mysticism) describes the church's role here as an 'action for solidarity' that goes beyond contemporary liberal pluralism whilst also in practice operating within it.²⁷ However, in acknowledging that Christian revelation does not offer any precise instructions for engaging with economic, social or political systems, he goes on to assign to the Christian political role a merely 'metaphorical' vision of the ordering of secular human society.²⁸ A kenotic egalitarianism, however, on the basis of the findings of this thesis, would venture to assert its Christian voice in secular reality in more principled ways. For despite the different understandings of the detachment in which they are grounded, the thoroughly secular or atheistic programme of Nagel on the one hand, and the views stemming from faith as propounded by Dionysian apophaticism on the other, have been shown to share many strikingly similar goals and also a common language, thereby yielding a range of fruitful opportunities for rationally principled debate on areas of common interest and priorities. This has been accomplished, moreover, without compromising the faith commitments underlying the apophatic views espoused here.

To the contrary, the demand of radical detachment in the Dionysian/Eckhartian view, which both resonates with and diverges from Nagel's qualified or limited detachment can, as we have seen, be maintained in fully Christian form. Given this, a kenotic egalitarianism would hold the promise of also helping more broadly, even if indirectly, to alleviate what has been, for Christian theology since the emergence of the 17th-century 'Age of Enlightenment', the increasing difficulty of retaining a robust articulation of a unique *identity* while remaining more broadly *relevant* within society as a whole.²⁹ Beyond its more direct political interests, therefore, a kenotic

²⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 84.

²⁸ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 77.

²⁹ The search for social relevance whilst maintaining Christian tradition is the positive theological response to MacIntyre's observations on the need for traditional models of rationality with appropriate cultural embeddedness that I discussed in my introduction. For a theologian's understanding of 'the crisis of the identity and relevance of the Christian faith', see the opening chapter of Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God*. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 7-31.

egalitarianism, the groundwork for which this thesis has laid through its discussions of detachment, would be able to speak also to this broader and persistent concern of modern theology by tracing it to an apophatic ground: a ground in which the *via contemplativa* and the *via activa* are continuously interwoven, echoing the apophatic recognition that ‘the Unknowable God who dwells in brilliant darkness is also (and always) the God of intimate presence’.³⁰

³⁰ Janet Martin Soskice, ‘The Gift of the Name: Moses and the Burning Bush’ in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, eds, *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 61-75 (p 72).

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